



Yuri!!! On Ice: A Believable Homosexual Romance

I'm sure by now you've heard of an anime called *Yuri!!! On Ice* that took the anime fandom by storm? That figure skating anime? No? Well I'm here to tell you about it. Mostly about how it handles a genuine homosexual relationship in a sports anime differently than any other.

Yuri!!! On Ice came onto the scene during the Fall 2016 anime season airing from October-December. I watched it during the original run and then again when my sister wanted to watch it. The series is an original creation of director Sayo Yamamoto who worked on projects such as *Michiko to Hachin* and *Fujiko Mine*. She also worked with Shinichiro Watanabe (*Cowboy Bebop* fame) on a series called *Samurai Champloo*. During this time, she learned a lot from Watanabe in terms of style and they have a close relationship. Watanabe also worked as the music director for *Machiko to Hachin* and the music company that composed the music for *Yuri!!! On Ice* (Piano Inc.) was founded by Watanabe and Yoko Kanno (music composer for *Cowboy Bebop*). The animation studio that worked on *Yuri!!! On Ice*, Studio MAPPA, first worked on another series by Watanabe called *Zankyou no Terror*. *Fujiko Mine* and *Machiko to Hachin* both address sexuality and homosexuality in their characters, but they couldn't reach a large audience due to their timeslots and niche production quality. *Yuri!!! On Ice* is the first series to gain support in domestic and international advertising since it is made for a larger audience. A characteristic of it being built for a larger audience is the international aspect of the show. It's centered around an international sport therefore it includes international characters that compete and multiple countries are represented. (such as Thailand, South Korea, Canada, Czech Republic, Italy, etc.). It is also worth mentioning that the Canadian and American competitors are represented as French-Canadian and Latin American respectively giving representation to those who wouldn't generally be represented in anime (such as the American guy being the

patriotic white man with blonde hair and blue eyes). She took advantage of this new audience to reveal that homosexual relationships in anime can be just as meaningful as heterosexual.

The show centers around figure skater Yuri Katsuki who starts out as Japan's top figure skater. By the time of the Grand Prix (basically professional figure skating playoffs) he flubs his performance and places last in the competition. When he returns home, and sees his family and friends again, a video leaks of him performing a routine originally done by world champion (and Yuri's idol) Victor Nikiforov. The video catches Victor's attention and he flies to Japan to become Yuri's coach for the next competition season. Very early on it seems that Victor is attracted to Yuri. They slowly build their relationship past teacher and student into something that neither of them could have expected. Their relationship is handled beautifully and much differently than in other sports anime where the homosexual tension is mostly a form of queer-baiting. Queer-baiting is when there is sexual tension between two characters of the same gender that are canonically straight to the point where it's fetishizing. It's complicated but interesting to watch them grow as characters as their feelings grow before our eyes and those of their peers.



(the central couple, from left: Yuri Kasuki and Victor Nikiforov. Image credit to Studio MAPPA)

Traditionally (for lack of a better word), in anime that centers around any kind of professional sport the cast is dominated by boys, them being the ones who play the sport. In these shows (and many others in other genres), there's usually some homoerotic undertones or sexual tension that panders to the audience. These relationships never usually come into fruition and the characters are portrayed as very good friends on a sports team, but the fandom usually thinks otherwise. More often than not these character will be in love and/ or cuddling or more in fan art or fan fiction than in the original story. Their lives and relationships are expanded on creating a fantasy world separate from the show's canon. An example of a relationship filled with queerbaiting and fandom fantasies could be Makoto Tachibana and Haruka Nanase of *Free! Iwatobi Swim Club*. They are childhood friends and spend a lot of time talking to one another

one on one but where is one scene in particular where Haru saves Makoto from drowning and is about to give him mouth to mouth resuscitation which therefore hints at a “first kiss” between the characters. In the end Makoto coughs and wakes up before Haru even has the chance, but the implications of the scene have already been, well implied even though the context of the scene suggests otherwise; Haru almost kissed Makoto. The fans are generally responsible for making these relationships a reality but *Yuri!!! On Ice* goes all the way with out all that pandering and queer-baiting. Instead, it follows through and their relationship becomes canon. This is the first sports anime I have ever watched that has had a canon romantic relationship, and a homosexual one at that. This show does not fetishize the relationship in any way. It’s just two complex characters, who happen to be of the same gender that fall in love, bringing in new complications.

Yuri’s side of the relationship needs to be viewed in the context of ten years spent idolizing Victor with posters of him in his room and following his exploits as a skater during his career. Even adopting a puppy of a similar breed to Victor’s dog and naming it after him. Victor was practically Yuri’s inspiration to become a figure skater himself. The whole relationship is seen through Yuri’s point of view. Any sexualisation in other queer-baiting shows feels like you’re watching on a camera looking in, but in this series you’re seeing through Yuri’s eyes everything that Victor does and how he looks. Every time we see Victor on screen he looks flawless, even when he’s sleeping, which hints that Yuri sees him this way. It’s done in a way that you can insert yourself into Yuri’s character making you feel what he does during those scenes such as the one shown in the image above. That scene occurs in only the second episode of the anime and shows how forward Victor is towards Yuri this early in the show and sets a tone for how the relationship is going to play out. In the scene Victor gets very close to Yuri and gets into that pose in the image, holding Yuri’s hand but then after a little bit the nerves take over and Yuri backs away comically.

The relationship between Victor and Yuri is flawed and complicated, just like their characters. Yuri is very self conscious and has some anxiety issues which slowly fall away slightly in order to let Victor in, though they are still present. He even has multiple points in the series where he worries that Victor would leave at anytime if he deems Yuri unworthy of his time, but Victor stays committed to training him to be a better skater no matter what. Victor is perfect in almost every way as a skater, but as a coach, he’s still learning. He struggles with motivating Yuri and keeping his dwindling confidence up while still disciplining him enough so that he learns what he does wrong so he can improve. Victor brings out of Yuri the skater that Yuri could have only dreamt of being only a year before after his failure. They both bring the best out of each other no matter how hard it gets. What I love about how this relationship is portrayed is that it is so real. You see every good and bad moment they go through; Yuri’s anxieties getting in the way, Victor not knowing how to handle it but still trying anyway.

I came into this anime being a general fan of bl (boys love)/ LGBT romance fiction. From that perspective this anime was very refreshing in the way that it portrayed a homosexual relationship between two characters in only 12, 23 minute episodes. It portrayed a meaningful homosexual relationship that isn’t seen the same way in many that I have seen before. It was nice not having to worry about spending the whole series hoping for them to get together. This is a series of sexual awakening for Yuri and it is a beautiful story of a year in his life where he finds out who he really is. If you haven’t jumped on the *Yuri!!! On Ice* bandwagon by now, I would suggest you come along for the ride.