

## Sickles football takes on Chamberlain, but bands will make beautiful music together



The Chamberlain High band prepares for its season opener Friday, which will include a performance with the band from rival Sickles High. The directors of the two bands are married. [OCTAVIO JONES | Times]



**Bre Bradham** Times Staff Writer  
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TAMPA — Keith Griffis leaned out of the band director's tower and spoke over the loudspeakers, mimicking the voice of a game announcer.

"We invite our friends from Chamberlain High School to join — "

"Boooo!" came the resounding response from 220 members of the Sickles High School band below, as you might expect from competitive young football fans.

But then, they began yelling: "CHICK-uls! CHICK-uls!"

Griffis, the band director, rephrased.

"Welcome to the field the CHICK-uls band," he said, laughing, "for a sizzling rendition of *Havana*!" There is no Chickles High School. But for one night only, through an unusual alignment of variables, there will be a Chickles High School Band.

It's a mashup of Chamberlain, the school on Busch Boulevard and North Boulevard with a largely urban enrollment of about 1,600, and Sickles, at Gunn Highway and Ehrlich Road, with a largely suburban enrollment of 2,300.

Bands from the two schools will join together to perform the popular song by Miami singer-songwriter Camila Cabello during halftime of the pre-season football opener Friday at Sickles.

It all started because the band directors at the two schools are married. Keith and Amanda Griffis have conducted joint outings for their leaders — where the name "Chickles" was born — and they schedule practices at the same time so they can get home at night to spend time together.

And now, through a blip in football scheduling, their schools are playing one another even though they're in different athletic divisions. Mix in a principal at Chamberlain who used to work at Sickles, and the path was paved for collaboration.

The bands will only have a few minutes, if that, to practice together right before halftime Friday. So this week, they've been drilling separately as if another band stood with them.

At the same time Tuesday afternoon, members of each band grabbed their instruments and gathered to practice on concrete slabs adjacent to their football fields.

At Chamberlain, the 93 students circled up and stretched while *Havana* played over a speaker, the scent of sunscreen powerful as temperatures hovered at the same 89 degree mark recorded that day in the Cuban capital.

Amanda Griffis, wearing a headset and red-and-white Chamberlain Chiefs cap, stood atop a metal stand and called out over a speaker: "Band, I hope you're feeling good, because you're looking good today."

They all formed up in orderly rows, including senior Raphael Gargiulo, 17, who has played in the band for four years — trombone before he became a drum major.

Gargiulo is excited about performing with the Sickles band, but he's also eager just to get out on the field for the start of the new season.

And while collaboration will make Friday's performance special, each band will work as always to motivate its own team and fans.

"As far as the football game," Gargiulo said, "I'm pretty sure we're going to kick some butt."

Eight miles west at Sickles, Keith Griffis, in green home-team visor, monitored his band from atop the concrete-block director's tower.

The students gathered in a semi-circle for the last song of the three-hour practice, *Havana*. The piece was chosen by Keith and Amanda Griffis because they thought their bands would find it fun. Band members moved and grooved through the rhythm. A line of clarinets got a low kick going and others popped their shoulders and raised their knees with each beat.

"We'll do the best we can as drum majors," said Sickles senior Victoria Moll, 17. "Obviously the Griffises have been working together. With that similar vision, it shouldn't be a problem."

Jason Lane, coach of the Chamberlain football team, didn't realize the two band directors were married until this week, but it brought a smile to his face.

"I love it," Lane said.

Still, he's all about the football.

"It's a quality opponent," Lane said, "and we're looking forward to playing."

Keith and Amanda Griffis, both 27, met in 2014 at a classical music concert through a mutual friend and married in June 2017. Both are pursuing master's degrees — he at the University of South Florida, she at Florida State University.

People have been asking whether their bands would perform together since Amanda Griffis took over at Chamberlain four years ago.

The Chamberlain-Sickles football game only happened because Chamberlain's scheduled opponent pulled out and school officials went searching for a replacement.

They settled on Sickles, in part because of connections: Several faculty and staff members had moved from Sickles to Chamberlain, including principal Jake Russell. Russell had hired Keith Griffis at Sickles.

The two schools have performed jointly with other high school bands before, Chamberlain with Gaither High and Sickles with Jefferson High for a 9/11 memorial and with Plant High.

"Every now and then, we do something like this," Keith Griffis said.

Still, there's only one Chickles. The Griffises welcome the chance to kick off the school year this way.

"It's really just a family affair," Keith Griffis said.

"We love this. I don't think you can beat this time of year."

But for all that, romance isn't getting in the way of rivalry.

"I love him," Amanda Griffis said, "but I want our football team to win."

*Bre Bradham can be reached at [bbradham@tampabay.com](mailto:bbradham@tampabay.com) and (803) 460-9001.*