By RUSTY MILLER

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COLUMBUS — In the Meyer household in the 1960s and ‘70s in Ashtabula, Ohio, it was a virtual holiday when the Michigan-Ohio State game came along each November.

Now Urban Meyer, removed from the rivalry for so long, is back home and an integral part of “The Game.”

“This is all I knew growing up; it’s all anybody knew,” Meyer said Monday as he spoke for the first time about his No. 4-ranked and unbeaten Buckeyes game on Saturday at Ohio Stadium against the 20th-ranked Wolverines.

“In the era when I grew up, there really wasn’t much other than three channels on your television,” said the 48-year-old Meyer. “There was this game. It was Bo Schembechler, Woody Hayes, Pete Johnson, Archie Griffin. That’s all.”

Those memories still burn brightly for Meyer, in his first year coaching at Ohio State (11-0, 7-0 Big Ten).

When he ended a year-long hiatus from coaching (he wasn’t far away, working as an ESPN analyst) to take over a downtrodden Ohio State program coming off a loss to Michigan, he made a point of hiring coaches who knew how ingrained The Game is in the culture and

consciousness of Michigan, Ohio and the Midwest.

“When I put the staff together, I wanted to make sure that I didn’t have to sit there and teach people about (the rivalry),” Meyer said. “I wanted this to be close to home. And it is.”

Suddenly, The Game has taken on a new tenor. When Brady Hoke — himself an Ohio native — took the Michigan job two years ago, he slammed his fist down repeatedly on the podium as he emphasized that the annual showdown with the Buckeyes would no longer be an afterthought to the games against Notre Dame and Michigan State.

“Growing up in (Ohio) you knew Bo and Woody and the great fights they had,” Hoke said on the day he was introduced. “It is the most important game on that schedule. Not that the others aren’t important, but it is the most important game on that schedule. It’s almost personal.”

Perhaps the ascension of Meyer and Hoke will reinvigorate the rivalry, much like Schembechler’s hiring did. Ohio State was coming off a 50-14 victory in 1968 on the way to winning the national championship. Schembechler, yet another Ohio native with deep roots in the rivalry, came on the leafy Ann Arbor, Mich., campus and reminded his players daily of the shellacking they had taken the year before.

The Wolverines stunned the top-ranked Buckeyes 24-12 in ’69, touching off what is commonly called “The Ten-Year War” of games contested between the mercurial Hayes and his former Ohio State assistant.

Meyer took the opportunity to take a not-so-subtle shot at Hoke on Monday.

“He was born in the state of Ohio — which I still don’t get,” Meyer said of Hoke. “That’s another story. But I guess it adds to the intensity.”

So the battle lines are already being drawn in a new, updated version of those clashes from

1969-78.

Both sides play silly yet serious word games. Meyer makes it clear that he doesn't want any of his Buckeyes to even utter the word "Michigan" — if they do he sends an icy stare their way. His prefers the phrase, just like Woody did, of "That Team Up North."

Hoke refuses to call Ohio State by its rightful name. He, along with all his players and coaches, instead call it simply "Ohio." That drives the Buckeyes and their fans, who see it as a sign of disrespect, stark-raving mad.

Michigan quarterback Devin Gardner was asked Monday what happens to freshmen who slip up and accidentally say Ohio State instead of just Ohio.

"They don't," he said.

Hoke implemented the rule when he arrived on campus.

"And, that's just how it is," Gardner said.

Meyer has ordered guests wearing a blue shirt at practice to leave and put on something scarlet. Hoke doesn't allow anyone wearing the Buckeyes' colors inside Schembechler Hall.

Both have placed reminders about the rivalry throughout their training facilities.

"It's not just like another week. The intensity is even higher than it normally is," Ohio State defensive lineman Garrett Goebel said. "There are signs all around the weight room saying 'Beat That Team Up North.'"

Two coaches of the same generation, from the same state, Meyer and Hoke were steeped in the legends and lore of the series, of playing for bragging rights in November and despising your rival the other 51 weeks of the year, too.

They know that winter seems colder and longer for the loser, while the winner's season is looked upon fondly no matter its record.

"UCLA-USC or Alabama-Auburn or Florida-Georgia, everybody has their rivalry," said Meyer, who was the coach at Florida 2005-2010. "This is home. If you ask me what makes (The Game) unique, it's the fact that I grew up in this state, and this is all you know growing up."__PUBLIC__