

Roethlisberger finds past, new admirers in Switzerland

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LAUPERSWIL, Switzerland -- Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger is enchanted with nearly everything in his ancestral homeland of Switzerland, except maybe the quality of American football played here.

Schools closed, villagers came from kilometers away and even diplomats celebrated Monday's visit by Roethlisberger, who led the Steelers to a National Football League championship earlier this year, but whose great-great-grandfather originated from this small town in the Swiss cheese-producing region of Emmental.

"It is something out of a dream or a movie," Roethlisberger said in Lauperswil, a town of 2,800 people about 20 miles east of the capital, Bern. "I'm starting to feel more Swiss the longer I'm here."

Roethlisberger, on a weeklong trip to discover his family's roots in Switzerland, tried his hand at hornussen -- a Swiss sport somewhere between golf and baseball -- listened to accordion and Alphorn-driven folk music, tasted the local cheese and met family members still living near his family's former farm.

The quarterback seemed as excited as the townsfolk by the experience, busily snapping photos of the rustic bai horse-drawn carriages and grassy valleys of this traditional, still largely agricultural region. He also inquired about purchasing a Bernese Sennenhund and got to see his old family coat-of-arms reproduced from local archives for the occasion.

"It's important to know where your family comes from," Roethlisberger said, appearing moved by his first-ever holiday abroad. "I always knew I was of Swiss descent, but I never knew where until recently. It's great to be able to come back to the actual village and see firsthand how it was for my family."

Roethlisberger came to Switzerland as spokesman for Swiss Roots, a campaign with the slogan "How Swiss Are You?" intended to help Americans of Swiss origin reconnect with the Old Country.

During Roethlisberger's guided tour, locals crowded every hillside, farm house and small, traditional cheese enterprise visited by the quarterback and his family, either to hear Roethlisberger's father, Ken, blow into an Alphorn, or just to get a glimpse of the Steeler leader known as "Big Ben."

"It's just incredible what he, as a Roethlisberger of this region, has achieved," said Adrian Roethlisberger, who lives in a nearby town and assumes he must be a family member because of his last name and self-claimed resemblance to the quarterback. "Look at him! He's one of us!"

For Ben, whose visit includes other sites in Switzerland and continues through Thursday, the appreciation appeared mutual, even if a Sunday appearance at an American football contest between the Bern Grizzlies and Bienne Jets was probably less competitive than the types of games Roethlisberger is accustomed to.

"It wasn't quite the NFL," Roethlisberger said. "But hopefully American football will continue to grow over here."

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