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Ben cuts the Swiss cheese

By David Fleming
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Still a bit groggy from the jet lag and, OK, one too many Feldschlösschens at the futbol match the day before inside Stade de Suisse -- where the home crowd in Bern supported its team by chanting, I swear, we love we love -- YOUNG BOYS! I tipped the room service guy five francs, poured myself a vat of espresso and clicked on the telly just in time to catch the lead story at the top of the hour on the Swiss equivalent of CNN.

With my back to the TV this is what I heard, " ... frauch-n-something-dee-deoutch-y-franc-n-yabbin ... David Fleming von ESPN ... "

Reporting for a story in an upcoming edition of The Magazine, I spent all of last week zig-zagging across Switzerland with Ben Roethlisberger and his family -- in a dizzying, engrossing whirlwind of fondue, French wine, breathtaking natural beauty, clocks, lederhosen, yodelers, Alphorns and Swiss hospitality sweeter than chocolate -- as the Steelers QB investigated his Swiss heritage with the help of an innovative and tireless organization called [Swiss Roots](#).



Ben cuts the cheese. (The joke never gets old).

The main purpose of the trip was not to make me a household name in Switzerland, but for the Roethlisberger clan to visit a rustic farmhouse in the lush green valley of Geissbuehl, Lauperswil, where Ben's great, great grandfather lived before emigrating to the U.S. in 1873. Riding to the event down country lanes so narrow yellow wildflowers brushed against either side of the car, the tight-knit Roethlisbergers -- mom, Brenda, dad, Ken, and little sister, Carlee (herself a standout athlete at Findlay High School and a real trooper who never once complained about having to suffer through jet lag at prom) -- giggled at the it's-a-small-world-after all sight of spray-painted banners that read "Welcome to the Home: #7 Ben" that could just as easily been hanging from the front row of Heinz Field.

Upon Ben's arrival the locals were indifferent, at best, (or should I say, neutral). At his first stop, walking near the famous wooden bridge, Kapellbrücke, in Lucerne -- which features a stone Wasserturm (water tower) that at one time had been used as a torture chamber but is now occupied by a gift shop -- the townsfolk had no idea who Ben was; only that his baggy shorts and backwards Nike hat made him look like a school boy.

"He's no Madonna," sniffed one member of the Swiss press. But by the third day of Ben's adventure, Roethlisberger was a national sensation and his great-great grandpa's barn looked like the Steelers locker room after Super Bowl XL.

Near a wooden door frame that still bears a carving of his family name, Roethlisberger was given the high honor of cutting a block of locally-produced cheese that was roughly the size and weight of a manhole cover. They take their dairy very seriously here and Ben needed something that looked like a hack saw to cut through the ceremonial cheese. (Yes, yes, I said Big Ben cut the cheese. Go ahead. Get it out. Made me giggle, too. Okay, done? Not yet? Now? Good. Let's move on.)

He was also asked to name a brown and white female calf that had been born on the farm two days earlier. Ben ignored my suggestion of "Cow-her" and went with "Benita," showing just slightly more innovation than the Steelers' 2006 offensive playbook.

The day before we rode scooters around the cobblestone streets of the quaint capital city of Bern. In honor of the first animal the city's founders killed in 1191, Bern features a pit full of black bears near the center of town. (It's where they throw visiting sports writers who laugh every time someone cuts the cheese.)

Our first stop on the scooters, however, was an ancient clock tower. Despite its rudimentary parts of wood, stone balances and iron brackets, this clock is famous for its Swiss precision, its colorful façade and the fact that Albert Einstein himself listened to the chimes from his home just down the street while formulating the theory of relativity.

After the main group investigated the very top of the tower I decided to go have a look-see for myself. Up, I went, through a dizzyingly narrow stone spiral staircase and then an endless link of nearly vertical stairs made out of nothing more than split logs. Once at top, I had just begun to take in the panorama when I heard the creaky, unmistakable sound of the tower's heavy wooden door slam shut.

I held my breath. There was a jingling of keys. A click. A clunk. A ca-LATCH.

Gulp. I raced down the steps and reached the door just as the group was gliding away on their scooters.

Now, I tried to act all cool at first, just calmly knocking on the door. (It could be worse, I thought. I could be locked in here with the camera guy from the Steelers who had been wearing the same clothes for 72 hours after his luggage got lost. Something the airlines and Swiss reps tried to remedy with [1] a package of tighty whiteys and [2] a sweatshirt from that local futbol club that said YOUNG BOYS across the front.) But when no one answered, I pounded a little harder ... and then a little harder ... and then in no time I was kicking, pounding and, I believe, yodeling at the top of my lungs for help.

Luckily, Ben was the lone straggler, getting one last shot of the colorful and magnificent clock tower with his own personal DVD camera.

"HEY!" he yelled down to the group. "I think someone's locked in the tower!"

Perfect, I thought. I'm glad it's Ben. We're pretty tight. I wrote his lone Magazine cover when he was a rookie. We're both Miami of Ohio guys. He's got some QB diva in him and at times Ben can be polite but distant. But for all he's accomplished at 24, he's a pretty friendly, unassuming kid who still seems like he could get grounded by his parents at any minute.

He'll be discreet, I thought. He won't draw any extra attention. This won't turn into an international incident or anything.

And then, from the other side of the thick green door I heard, "Oh man I think it's Fleming. Fleming's locked in the tower! Come back. We need a key! Sweet. Hey, wait, everybody get your cameras ready. Hee. Hee. Hee."

And so, this is how I came to be the lead news item on Swiss television. The footage of me getting released from the clock tower and sheepishly rejoining the group, my face as red as the Swiss flag itself, ran at the top of the hour, every hour, for a full day. Walking the halls of the national museum in Zurich by myself a few days later I could still hear people snickering behind my back something

like "hoingen-ze-frautchn-von ESPN."

You see it wouldn't have been so bad, I suppose, if at the end of the footage Ben hadn't turned to the Swiss TV camera and said, "Ladies and gentlemen of Switzerland, for the record, that's David Fleming of ESPN."

This, of course, became a running gag through the rest of our journey. A gag much like the "cutting the cheese" line and the futbol team named Young Boys that just didn't seem to lose any of its humor even after the first 5,000 laughs.

On the final day of the trip, I sat next to Ben on a train as we climbed and clacked 14,000 feet to our destination: Junfrauoch (the Virgin). That's also known as "The Top of Europe." a place where the water is so pure, fish can't survive in the lakes. The view is so spectacular, on a clear day (unlike the one we had), you can see across three different countries and a handful of glaciers.

In the previous five days of Ben's Swiss Adventure, we had seen what it would take a normal tourist about a month and a half to experience.

Ancient churches decorated on the inside like giant pink and white birthday cakes; an American football game in front of an enthusiastic crowd where one of the officials worked the sidelines with a beer in his back pocket; cheese and chocolate of every conceivable size, color, texture and taste (as we sat at our final dinner someone from the group whimpered, "oh God, please ... no more cheese"); a polka rendition of Surfin' USA; sports of stone-throwing, farmers golf, curling, dog sledding and alpine wrestling (which is basically little more than organized wedgie fights); Ben had met the former Miss Swiss and the current world champion cheese maker; he had chipped golf balls down into a glacier; found a Bernese mountain dog to bring home; ran through a tunnel of ice cut out of a glacier; met and had lunch with world famous Formula One car designer Peter Sauber; partied in Zurich; had a snowball fight with his dad five miles above sea level; saw a Hooters restaurant in the mountain town of Interlaken (that thankfully, did not feature short orange lederhosen); toured castles; gathered car-loads full of gifts and mementos, keepsakes and memories and walked the same fields and listened to the same church bells as his great, great grandfather once did.



Ah yes, the clock tower. And you can see how Ben gleefully rubs it in.

Yet on the train to the top of the Alps, when we talked about highlights of the trip he turned to me, smiled that wry smile of his -- the one blitzing linebackers from Seattle must have seen when they realized his rollout wasn't a scramble at all but a designed play -- and said, "Ya know, I still think you getting locked in that clock tower was pretty dang funny, man."

Well, at least he didn't say cutting the cheese.

David Fleming is a senior writer at ESPN The Magazine. His book, "Noah's Rainbow: A Father's Emotional Journey from the Death of his Son to the Birth of his Daughter," can be ordered through [Baywood Publishing](#) or [Amazon.com](#). Contact him at Dave.Fleming@espn3.com.