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Swiss family Roethlisberger

Steelers quarterback visits town where ancestors lived

BY BRADLEY S. KLAPPER | THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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

Schools closed, villagers came from miles away and even diplomats celebrated Monday's visit by Roethlisberger, a Findlay, Ohio, native who led the Steelers to a Super Bowl championship earlier this year and 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 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 barns, 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. "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.

The initiative - whose board also includes other prominent Americans with Swiss ties such as sex therapist Dr. Ruth Westheimer and U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin, a Wisconsin Democrat - comes at a time when there have been strains in the usually good relations between Switzerland and the United States.

Switzerland is one of many countries that has raised concerns with the U.S. over human rights issues, including alleged abuses of prisoners at the U.S. base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Swiss banks came under criticism from Holocaust survivors for allegedly stealing, concealing or sending to the Nazis millions of dollars worth of Jewish holdings.

Negotiations over a free trade agreement between the two nations have stalled.

Ambassador Raymond Loretan, Swiss Roots' co-chair, said visits by prominent Swiss-Americans like Roethlisberger can help boost ties between the two "sister republics" and highlight their common heritage. Over 1 million Americans indicated they were of Swiss origin in the 2000 U.S. Census.



In general, Switzerland takes great pride in people of Swiss ancestry, even if it's many generations back. Media in the country regularly attach the phrase "originally Swiss" to the names of famous Americans, including U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman of suburban Cincinnati and - of course - Roethlisberger, whose great-great-grandfather left for the United States in 1873.

During Roethlisberger's guided tour, locals crowded every hillside, farm house and small, traditional cheese enterprise visited by the quarterback and his family.

"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.

For Ben, whose visit to Switzerland continues through Thursday, the appreciation appeared mutual, even if a Sunday appearance at a football game between the Bern Grizzlies and the Bienne Jets was less competitive than the 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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