

Roethlisberger explores Swiss roots

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 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 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, appearing moved by his first-ever trip 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.

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 democratic heritage. Over 1 million Americans indicated they were of Swiss origin in the 2000 U.S. Census.

"Some kept the Swiss culture, like in Ohio and Wisconsin, where they kept the Swiss traditions and even the Swiss language sometimes," Loretan said. "This program aims to reconnect them to Switzerland, and also the many others who are not even aware of their Swiss roots."

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 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 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."

Posted 5/9/2006 12:32 AM ET