



Little Joe returned to public display at the Franklin Park Zoo yesterday, more than three years after the gorilla briefly escaped and attacked two people. His \$2.3 million exhibit space is fortified with triple-layered glass and steel mesh roof. (John Tlumacki/ Globe Staff)

An imposing Little Joe set for prime time 400-pound escapee back onstage at Franklin Park

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By Jenna Russell, Globe Staff | February 14, 2007

Little Joe, the gorilla best known for escaping the Franklin Park Zoo, stalked back into public view yesterday after three years away from the spotlight. His entrance, into a \$2.3 million exhibit space newly fortified with triple-layered glass and steel mesh roof, did not disappoint his fans.

Joe, now an imposing 14-year-old, strode into the enclosure, eyed the people watching through a new glass viewing wall, and ran about 30 feet to slam his 400-pound frame against the glass.

Startled, some zoo donors and photographers gasped and stepped back. But zoo officials said Joe's antics were normal behavior and a clear sign that the animal is glad to be back onstage.

"He's so happy," said one of the gorilla's keepers, smiling proudly and snapping photos through the glass. "It's a sign of happiness."

In September 2003, Little Joe escaped from the gorilla exhibit by climbing over a wall, attacked and injured a teenager and a toddler, and terrorized the neighborhood before he was tranquilized and captured.

Lacking the money to secure the gorilla enclosure, the zoo instead placed Joe and its other adolescent male gorilla, Okpara, known as Okie, in isolation, away from the public. Zoo leaders sought a new home for the gorillas, but found no takers. Private donors and state leaders eventually came through with funding, and construction of a new enclosure, said to be escape-proof, began last fall.

Unveiling the redesigned space yesterday for reporters and zoo members, Zoo New England president John Linehan called it a "standard-setter" that will be used as a model by other zoos. In addition to its tight security measures -- no openings between the glass, cement, and steel mesh barriers -- the exhibit is larger, and provides new cement rocks and sculpted trees where the gorillas can climb. Franklin Park's seven gorillas began settling into their new home this week, and the exhibit will open to the public Saturday.

For Joe, the return to exhibition is especially important, said zookeepers, who say he is an intelligent, sociable gorilla who thrives on human contact. They tried to keep him stimulated in his years behind the scenes, but nothing could replace the missing thrill of exhibition.

"Joe and Okie were off exhibit for so long, and they love people so much," Linehan said. "People provide a changing stimulus."

More importantly, he said, the improved exhibit will help ensure the survival of the western lowland gorilla.

The lawyer for the two girls hurt by Little Joe said yesterday that he expects both lawsuits against the zoo to go to trial this year. Courtney Roberson, then 18, and Nia Scott, then 2, sustained cuts and bruises when the escaping gorilla threw them to the ground.

"One of the objectives of suits like ours is to make exhibits like this safer, so no one else will be a victim, and we can only hope we have achieved that objective," said the lawyer, Donald L. Gibson.

Visitors will now be able to observe the gorillas much more closely, through five glass viewing walls around their pen, including one that is 19 feet long.

Yesterday, 2-year-old Kimani rode piggyback on her mother, Kiki, then clambered off to forage for carrots. Little Joe repeated his body-slam against the window, but he also assumed a more contemplative posture .

"It takes my breath away," said Cynthia Hill, a zoo member and donor.

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