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Little Joe the gorilla eager to say hi after three years



Little Joe made his grand entrance at the refurbished gorilla exhibit today at the Franklin Park Zoo. (John Tlumacki/Globe Staff)

By Jenna Russell, Globe Staff

Little Joe, the gorilla made famous by his escape from the Franklin Park Zoo, wasn't shy about saying hello today when a group of visitors got the first public peek at the ape in more than three years.

Joe ran to the edge of his new [\\$2.3 million steel-enforced gorilla habitat](#) and threw his hairy chest against the triple-layer glass walls in a body slam that echoed with a thud. The noise gave a scare to some journalists and zoo donors on a tour of the new facility today in advance of its formal opening on Saturday.

Trainers assured the group that it was natural for gorillas to pound and bang the glass, especially for Little Joe, an ape that craves public attention.

In August 2003, Joe made his first brief escape over a wall and a 12-foot moat around the former gorilla enclosure at the zoo. [Six weeks later](#), Little Joe climbed over the wall again, but this time he ran outside and attacked two girls, including a 2-year-old. It took two hours and an army of police to corral the gorilla, who had to be subdued with tranquilizer darts.

Since the second escape, Little Joe has been kept out of public view while officials built him and the other six gorillas a new home. The habitat unveiled today inside the zoo's Tropical Forest building includes a new mesh cap of woven steel cables over its top that is designed to stop the animals from climbing out.

The new exhibit gives the gorillas more room to play, with steel-reinforced "trees," ropes for swinging, and vertical space for climbing. The restoration was funded by private donors, state government, and leftover money from the 2004 Democratic National Convention.

Today, the apes frolicked in the new space. Little Joe wrestled with Okpara, one of the zoo's other male gorillas, rolling over and over again on the ground.

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