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San Jose skate culture finally has a park as big as its worldwide reputation. Lake Cunningham Regional Skate Park opens this month with a lot of buzz and a bit of anti-authoritarian drama.

By Gary Singh
Photographs by Felipe Buitrago

THE GREEN foothills of east San Jose form the backdrop as we stand in what seems like acres of smooth cement. The brand new Lake Cunningham Regional Skate Park doesn't officially open until April 26, but some local skateboard celebrities recently decided to test the place out. So I'm there in the hot sun on a weekday afternoon. Fields of dandelions surround the place and a handful of palm trees dot the concrete landscape, which is surrounded by barbed wire fence.

Even though the skaters are irritated at having to wear full elbow and knee pads at someone else's discretion, all agree that 3,500 cubic yards of concrete and 437,000 linear feet of reinforced steel went to very good use in building what is now by far the largest skatepark in all of California.

Even if you don't skate, which I don't, one cannot be help being overwhelmed by the enormity of the whole place. Every skater I speak with expresses a feeling of relief at realizing that such a place is finally here in San Jose, and that he no longer has to drive hundreds of miles to find a park of similar magnitude. And everyone also concurs that with this new park comes all the drama involved with the skate community in general.

Thanks to world-renowned skaters like Steve Caballero, San Jose has always been a mecca for skateboarding. The aerial shots of this place are staggering, and from now on, when people fly into San Jose they will notice this park from the skies. Will this new skatepark be our version of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis? Will it be one of our signature landmarks?

"The one thing special about San Jose in the skate industry is that we've always had something going over time to bring people to San Jose to skate," Caballero tells me. "Whether it was a ramp in a warehouse, whether it was the Raging Waters ramp in the '80s, whether it was Winchester Skatepark in the '70s. So we've always had something pretty cool that attracted people to the city. And we'd get other people from different cities and even different states coming over to San Jose to skate the spots that we made famous in the magazines and videos. So I believe this skatepark will once again be an attraction for our industry, where people will come in and out of our city. The park's at that level of attracting people to the city and the sport as well."

The concept of adding a skatepark to Lake Cunningham originated with the City of San Jose Greenprint, adopted by the City Council in September of 2000. Feasibility studies eventually took place, resulting in an amendment to the Lake Cunningham Regional Park Master Plan, which was approved by the council on Dec. 5, 2006. After the contract was awarded a month later, groundbreaking took place on March 3, 2007.

Jonny Manak, another local pro, says that people from out of town are already waiting for the place to open up. "I know somebody from Washington who's gonna drive down and they're already asking me if they can stay at my place," he says. "I'm getting all these emails. This guy in Arizona is driving up and he's telling me, 'Hey, I'm going to crash at your place.'"

As we stood there with the blazing hot sun beating down on the concrete, the skaters reiterated that a

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VIEW ASKEW: Jonny Manak (below) and Steve Caballero (above) on the 30-foot vert wall

park of this size and quality is long overdue in San Jose. The local neighborhood parks just haven't been cutting it over the years.

"This is, like, one of the meccas of skateboarding and yet we don't really have any place to skate until now," Manak says. "The skateparks we have, it's like, 'Thanks San Jose, they're cool and all,' but they aren't really that good. They're like the equivalent of a neighborhood park where you go play on the swings."

"There aren't a lot of public skateparks in the Bay Area," Caballero adds. "There's some scattered around here and there, but there's not a lot of this caliber. A lot of them are really small. They're not built very well."

Manak agrees: "You can get your skate legs going and get warmed up and all, but it's not like you're cutting ground with new-world-record kinda stuff."

That is, until now. The Lake Cunningham Regional Skate Park has already applied for three Guinness World Records and the powers that be will soon arrive.

"They'll be here in about four weeks," park manager Viet Nguyen tells me as we watch Caballero and Manak get weightless on the 30-foot-high vert wall.

Authority Sucks

Crudely simplified, skateboarding more than occasionally attracts certain types of individuals who don't particularly value authority figures, and some people have simply refused to wait until the new park opens before hitting the bowls. Damage from trespassers has delayed the official opening and anyone who now gets caught in the park before April 26 will be permanently expelled.



CARVING OUT A SPOT: Steve Caballero in the fullpipe

But this is all just part of the business. Skaters are used to circumventing the rules and one measly lock on a gate doesn't usually stop anybody. People are used to skirting the rules requiring pads, which normally aren't enforced to any serious degree. That is, again, until now.

"I used to work at Greer Park in Palo Alto for a long time and they made skaters wear pads and they locked the gates all the time," explains Ray Stevens II, another veteran of the San Jose skate scene along with Caballero. "They were just short of charging people and they realized over time people were cutting holes in the gates and hopping in at night. And as soon as the people who enforced wearing the pads would leave, then people would just not wear the pads any more. [The Lake Cunningham Park] is going to be a different situation in the sense that it's already in a park and there's barbed wire fences. And if you skate in there before it's open, you get banned for life. You won't get a chance to skate if they catch you."

Although everyone agrees that the park is a massive benefit to San Jose, they admit that the mandatory pads rule might turn off a few folks, as will the fees, which are \$2 per day or \$50 per year—along with a \$6 for parking.

"It's a great park, but it's already got two negatives against it as far as the street skaters go," explained Caballero. "Street skaters don't like to wear pads. It's not very comfortable for them. They can get away with helmets, but wearing knee pads and elbow pads—it just doesn't feel like street skating. It's like something else. It doesn't feel natural. That, and paying to get in and paying to park. So I would say three negatives."

Manak equates it to charging people to ride swings and Stevens adds: "You're not charging the basketball players to use the basketball hoops, are you? So why this?"

He also says he'd rather see an option to wear pads, at least for adults. "Make 'em wear a helmet and let 'em choose to wear pads," he tells me. "A lot of the vert skaters—a lot of the guys now don't even wear pads, which is insane. I DJ a lot of these contests and a lot of these guys going through these things—there's three guys at once going through the bowl—there's been some places where guys have gotten their teeth knocked out and concussions and shit like that. Shit happens, you know. But I guess if I was a parent, I'd want to know that junior in there is safe and wearing pads and all. But even if you're wearing pads, you can still get ruined sometimes."

Caballero agrees. "I understand wearing a helmet, 'cause you could fall and hurt your head," he says. "But if you're over 18 and have that aspect of being an adult and making your own proper decisions, then you should be able to skate at your own risk."

Just tell that to all the ambulance drivers.

"The ambulance is going to be at this park a lot. I can tell you that," he says. "It's gnarly. It's got some big stuff, so there's going to be a lot of blood and broken ankles. And that's because skateboarding is dangerous. It's like you're at a motocross track. The ambulance is going to show up. Someone's going to get hurt."

'Disneyland for Skaters'

Despite the dangers inherent in the sport, people everywhere seem to be ready to start grinding over at Lake Cunningham.

"People from all over are calling up and planning their vacations around this place," Nguyen says. "This is Disneyland for skaters."



BOWLED OVER: Longtime local skaters Dave

As we stand there watching the 43-year-old Caballero sail through the 70-foot-long fullpipe, Manak cannot wash the smile off his face. I ask him what impact this place is going to have on the kids of San Jose.

Stevens, Josh Balogh and Nick Kunder try out the new park.

"These kids aren't going to have any reservations about what skateboarding is, they don't have any opinion," he explains. "They're going to be seeing it for the first time up close. They're going to look at it and say, 'That looks fun going up in that big fullpipe. I want to do that.' I've noticed that a lot of the younger kids are taking a liking to bowl riding. Just like when I was a little kid. When I was younger, what appealed to me was flying around in the air. Being a little kid that could barely ride down the street, I said, 'I wanna fly like those guys.' So I think when those kids see that, it's going to be weird."

In the end, Caballero pointed a few things about the park he thought the designers could have done differently—for example, the street portion of the course is buried at the back—but he raved about the project as a whole.

"You can't really please everybody, but it will attract a lot of vert skaters and bowl skaters and people of a really high caliber," he said. "The stuff's not small. It's really deep. It's not very easy to skate. It'll definitely attract a higher quality of skaters to come and be challenged."

Manak added that the park is huge enough to attract a wide variety of people. "This new park is going to facilitate way more skateboarders, and on the East Side there's a huge population of kids that have nothing to do out there," he said. "And the park is so big, that so many people can ride it at once without it being a bummer. I think it's going to be a good thing for skateboarding in San Jose for sure."

The Drop-In

To celebrate the opening of the skatepark, an art collective group show will be on display at On the Corner Music in Campbell. "The Future Looks Bright" show will feature work by Steve Caballero, Lance Mountain, Jason Adams, Louie Barletta, Mofo, Paco Excel, Christine Benjamin, Saporn Sin and Gabe Garcia. An opening reception sponsored by Zola energy drinks will be held Friday, April 25, from 8pm to midnight. Live DJ music by Ray Stevens II, Adrian Medoza (AGE) and Rachael Caballero will be featured.

On the Corner Music is located at 530 E. Campbell Ave. in Campbell.

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