

Move over Messi, here come the robots

June 30 2013, by Toby Sterling



In this photo taken Thursday, June 27, 2013, a robot from the University of Bonn dribbles around a Japanese competitor at the RoboCup championships in Eindhoven, Netherlands. Around 300 teams from 40 countries are competing this week at the RoboCup. The competition has the long-term goal of building a team of androids good enough to beat the human world cup team by 2050. (AP Photo/Toby Sterling)

With the score tied 1-1, it's gone to a penalty shootout in a tense soccer match between teams from Israel and Australia. As the Australian

goalkeeper in his red jersey braces for the shot, the Israeli striker pauses. Then he breaks into a dance instead of kicking the ball. Perhaps he can be forgiven: He's a robot, after all.

Welcome to the RoboCup, where more than a thousand soccer-playing robots from forty countries have descended on the Dutch technology Mecca of Eindhoven this week with one goal in mind: beat the humans.

Eventually.

The tournament's mission is to defeat the human World Cup winners by 2050—creating technology along the way that will have applications far beyond the realm of sport.

To achieve the goal, organizers have created multiple competition classes—including small robots, large robots, humanoid robots and even [virtual robots](#)—with plans to merge their techniques into a single squad of all-star androids capable of one day winning a man vs. machine matchup.

For now, Lionel Messi doesn't need to look over his shoulder. Humanoid robots have difficulty keeping their balance, and the largest—human height—move more like, well, robots than world-class athletes.

"To be honest, I think a 3-year-old could win against any of the humanoid teams," says Marcell Missura of the University of Bonn, whose NimbRO team won the "teen" humanoid class in Mexico City last year.



In this photo taken Thursday, June 27, 2013 robotics students grab tools to make last minute tweaks to their robots ahead of a match at the RoboCup championships in Eindhoven, Netherlands. Around 300 teams from 40 countries are competing this week in the RoboCup championships. The competition has the long-term goal of building a team of androids good enough to beat the human world cup team by 2050. (AP Photo/Toby Sterling)

NimbRO's 3-foot (120 centimeter) striker sports a shock of white hair and a flashy pink bandanna as it towers above a Japanese opponent in one match. That's because the Japanese player doesn't have a head, just a prong with a camera mounted on top.

The NimbRO striker shuffles over to the ball where it lies near one sideline, centers itself carefully, and then raises its head to gauge the placement of the goal. It then shifts its weight to one foot, draws back

the other foot and kicks.

GOAAAAAAL!

The shot is not powerful, but it's spot on, and it leaves the opposing keeper flat-footed.

"It's starting to look like soccer," Missura says hopefully.

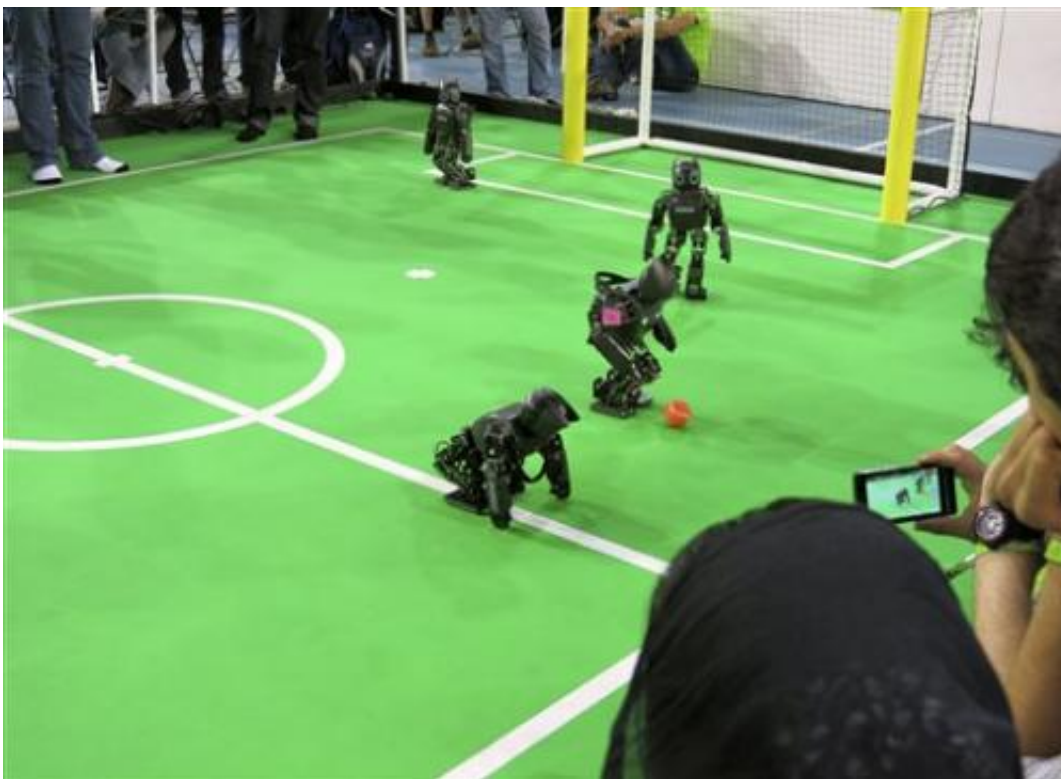


In this photo taken Thursday, June 27, 2013, robotics students from left to right: Chris Akatsuka, Dickens He, Alan Aquino and Tatenda Mushonga from the University of Pennsylvania's "UPennalizer" team show off their robots at the RoboCup championships in Eindhoven, Netherlands. Around 300 teams from 40 countries are competing this week in the RoboCup championships. The competition has the long-term goal of building a team of androids good enough to beat the human world cup team by 2050. (AP Photo/Toby Sterling)

Missura says his [robot](#)'s outfit, which also includes a pair of shorts that hang clumsily from its robotic hips, actually hinders its performance, leading to overheating. But making the bots look human is part of his task.

"If they're ugly they will not be accepted by people," he said. "Plus it is a little fun."

While the [humanoid robots](#) have a long way to go, it's a different story when robots are allowed to be robots—that is, with wheels, joints that can pivot 360 degrees and a wide array of sensors.



In this photo taken Thursday, June 27, 2013 robots in the "kids" humanoid division compete during the RoboCup championships in Eindhoven, Netherlands. The robot in the foreground is standing back up again after a fall. Around 300 teams from 40 countries are competing this week in the RoboCup championships. The competition has the long-term goal of building a team of

androids good enough to beat the human world cup team by 2050. (AP Photo/Toby Sterling)

The smallest robots, each about the size and shape of a birthday cake, swarm across their field, weaving around like piranhas. These bots play with a golf ball they kick into the goal so powerfully it's difficult to see it happen.

As in all the divisions, once a game starts, there's no human interference—except for substitutions, when humans are allowed to remove a bot that has broken down, and when referees eject a player for fouling an opponent.

The mid-size robot competition—which some fans refer to as "the R2-D2 league"—most resembles real soccer, played on a 60 foot (18 meter) long court.



In this photo taken Thursday, June 27, 2013, a woman shakes hands with a robot at an exhibition outside the RoboCup championships in Eindhoven, Netherlands. Around 300 teams from 40 countries are competing this week in the RoboCup championships. The competition has the long-term goal of building a team of androids good enough to beat the human world cup team by 2050. (AP Photo/Toby Sterling)

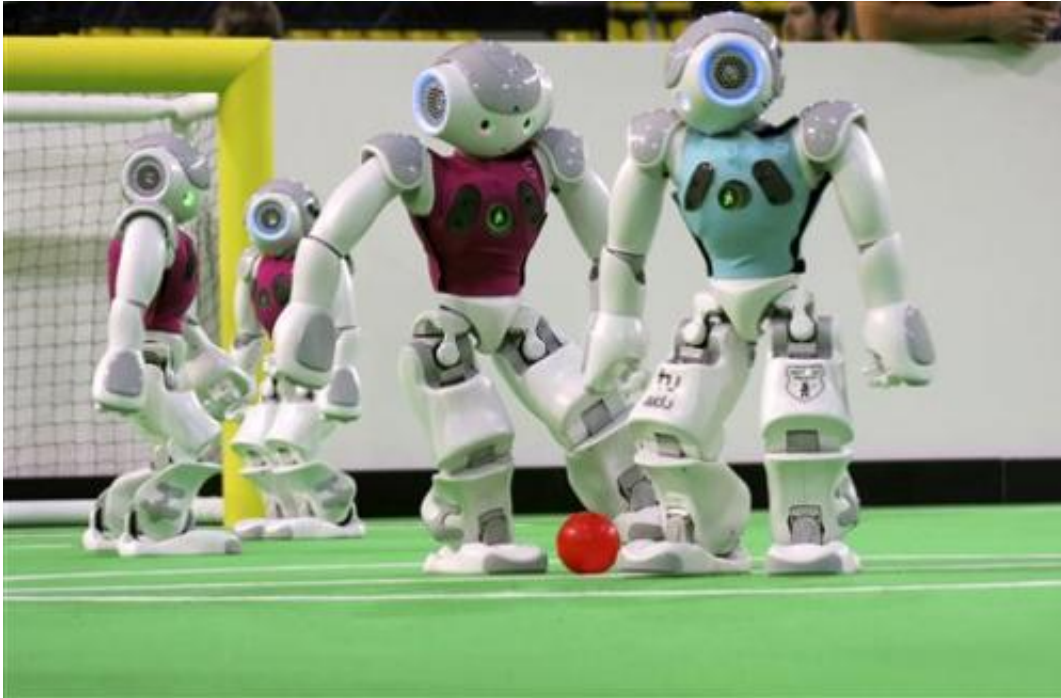
Majid Gholipour, leader of teams from Iran's Qazvin Open University, says his mid-size bots, which are shaped like buoys, have a top speed of around 14 mph (22 kph).

The bots use different kicks for passing and shooting, and they communicate their position to each other via wireless Internet connections.

The University of Eindhoven's "Tech United" is favored to repeat as mid-

size winner. But the Iranians were runners-up in 2012, and Gholipour says his robots' strategy is becoming more complex.

"If they are losing, they go on the attack," he says. "If they are winning, everybody goes to defense. Like Italians."



In this photo taken Thursday, June 27, 2013 robots in the "standard platform" division compete at the RoboCup championships in Eindhoven, Netherlands. Around 300 teams from 40 countries are competing this week in the RoboCup championships. The competition has the long-term goal of building a team of androids good enough to beat the human world cup team by 2050. (AP Photo/Toby Sterling)

Both the Dutch team and the Iranian team confide that they've got a secret weapon this year: "path planning," where the ball is passed toward open space as a robot scoots to intercept it.

But arguably the most enjoyable matches to watch are in the "standard platform" division, where all contestants use the same small humanoid robot, manufactured by Aldebaran Robotics. These are built with a stylish white design that includes glowing eyes that can change color to signal 'emotion.'



A robot from the RoBIU team fielded by Israel's Bar Ilan university prepares to take a penalty shot at the RoboCup in Eindhoven, Netherlands on Thursday, June 27, 2013. Around 300 teams from 40 countries are competing this week in the RoboCup championships. The competition has the long-term goal of building a team of androids good enough to beat the human world cup team by 2050. (AP Photo/Toby Sterling)

In this league, the challenge is purely in the software: the best computer

code wins.

Many teams play looking like they're drunk. When programmers push the limits on speed, the bots tend to fall down even more often than human professionals do.

But watching the bots stand back up, rotating their knees forward and pushing up off of one hand, it's possible to envision them running and jumping someday.



In this photo taken Thursday, June 27, 2013 Mostafa Mahmoodi, in charge of mechanical systems for the robotics team from Iran's Qazvid Islamic Open University, shows off the kicking and passing device used by his mid-sized robots at the RoboCup in Eindhoven, Netherlands. Around 300 teams from 40 countries are competing this week in the RoboCup championships. The

competition has the long-term goal of building a team of androids good enough to beat the human world cup team by 2050. (AP Photo/Toby Sterling)

Unlike with human players, there are no prima donnas among the robots. Each plays every position equally well, and they shift roles seamlessly. Goalkeepers have been known to come out and act as strikers. And when a bot gets a shot on goal, it rarely misses.

"That's the advantage a robot has over a human," says Dickens He, on the University of Pennsylvania's 'UPennalizers' team. "There are no mistakes: a robot does what it is programmed to do."

Tournament director Rene van de Molengraft says the humanoid bots range from as little as \$5,000 for the standard platform bots, when bought in bulk, to \$35,000 or more for handmade adult-size models, which are taller.



Robots in the "standard platform" division prepare for kickoff at a match held during the RoboCup championships in Eindhoven, Netherlands on Thursday, June 27, 2013. Around 300 teams from 40 countries are competing this week in the RoboCup championships. The competition has the long-term goal of building a team of androids good enough to beat the human world cup team by 2050. (AP Photo/Toby Sterling)

Still a bargain compared to the \$75 million Barcelona just paid for Brazil star Neymar.

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Citation: Move over Messi, here come the robots (2013, June 30) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-06-messi-robots.html>

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