

Zeppelins over Padua

Friday 4 July 2003

I arrived in Padua in the evening after a 10 hour train ride and it turned out that my hotel is just a 1 minute walk from the RoboCup 2003 venue. After a quick shower, I decided to attend the welcome reception but it took me some time to get access. The organization is Italian style; at first it was impossible to get in, but after talking to about 5 people, that also extensively discussed my case amongst themselves in rapid Italian, I ended up with three badges and was allowed access to the PadovaFiere.

You should imagine a huge hall full of people, robots, and computers of all shapes, colors, and sizes. The people are really from all over the globe and most of them were frantically making last minute changes on their programs. They were bended over their laptops, or walking on their socks on the green soccer fields offering bright orange balls to their robots to check their behavior.

[photo]

The reception was held in the middle of the hall and the free food & drinks were incentive enough to drag the people away from their screens for a while. I talked to a guy from the Isfahan University of Technology (IUT) in Iran and he told me they were about to play a friendly match to the Philips team from the Netherlands. It was a game between two teams of 4 middle size robots and what struck me most is how often they do not function properly. The robots of the Philips team for example (who had names like Henk and Anton) were regularly spinning around their axes instead of going after the ball. When I left during half time the score was Philips-IUT 1-2.

At the other end of the hall, I saw a soccer match between Sony's Aibo robots. Their behavior is programmed so that they are crawling towards the ball, trying to get it between their front legs, turn their whole body towards the goal, then stretch their front legs so that they fall on the floor and kick the ball with their chin. It is a curious, but quite effective method of kicking. Because there is not much team play, they often end up in some sort of scrum, all desperately trying to get to the ball.

A big crowd was gathered around a demonstration of the new humanoid from Sony: a 40 cm tall, 30 kg, bipedal robot. It has a hunched back, flexible knees, and it can do some amazing tricks. It can walk quite well without losing its balance and the flexible knees even allow it to dance the twist. I also saw it lying flat on its back, then getting up on its two feet to start a little walk. I figured this was my cue to go back to my hotel and lie flat on my back myself.