The Robot Olympics: Progress, Limits, and Everyday Life

Name Date Class

Reading

1 The second World Humanoid Robot Games, often nicknamed the Robot Olympics, took place in Beijing from 22 to 26 August 2026 at the National Speed Skating Oval. Organizers reported 666 teams and 2,056 robots, compared with 280 teams and about 500 robots at the first edition in 2025, and the program nearly doubled from 26 to 51 events. Thirty were sporting contests, such as athletics and football, and 21 were scenario-based events designed to test work in factories, hotels, homes, and shops. The Games are also a **showcase** for the host country's robotics industry and a public **benchmark** for researchers and investors, and the organizers openly describe them as a way to speed the robots' integration into human life.

2 The most dramatic change was speed. The winning 100 meters in 2025 took 21.50 seconds. In 2026, a robot called Tiangong Ultra, developed by the Beijing Humanoid Robot Innovation Center, ran 9.39 seconds on the opening day, 8.86 in a semifinal, and 8.64 in the large-robot final, all faster than Usain Bolt's human record of 9.58. According to Live Science, it also won the 400 meters in 38.15 seconds, against a human record of 43.03, and the 1,500 meters in 2 minutes 21.6 seconds, well inside the human record. Yet news agencies noted that these results are not **comparable** with human athletics, because the rules, robot classes, and conditions differ. The **spectacle** is real, but it is a claim about machines, not a race against people.

3 Speed is only one measure. The scenario events asked robots to sort books, serve food and drinks, respond to fires, and charge electric vehicles, and eight of them focused on **dexterity**: opening lids, assembling power tools, connecting cables, and picking up beans with tweezers. Reuters framed the contrast in its headline, asking whether robots that can outrun humans can also plug in a cable. The answer at these Games was mixed. Hand skills appeared to lag behind running, which suggests that fine manipulation is the **bottleneck** for useful work.

4 The rules show which abilities have matured. Running races, football, table tennis, and dance required **autonomy**, meaning that no human controlled the robot during the event. Weightlifting, kickboxing, and jumping still allowed remote control, and in scenario tasks, remote operation earned only half the points. This distinction matters, because a robot that is remotely controlled demonstrates mainly its hardware, not its ability to act alone. It also means that results from different events should not be compared directly, since the rules allowed different levels of human help.

5 Falls and their consequences remained the most visible problem. Robots still **stumble**: at the first Games in 2025, football players fell over en masse, and this year the fastest machines were still hard to stop. The robot that set the 8.64-second record crashed into the padded barrier after finishing, and almost all the runners in that final were carried away on stretchers. Dennis Hong, a robotics professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, told the Associated Press that the important questions are whether robots can move and stop safely, recognize unexpected obstacles, and recover from mistakes. Jonathan Hurst of Oregon State University told the agency that real progress would be measured when humanoids work autonomously for hours and generate economic value. Both comments point to **robust** behavior, not peak performance.

6 Outside the arena, the picture is more modest. Companies now **deploy** humanoids in factories and warehouses, and the strongest **tangible** results are in narrow, structured tasks. For the home, 1X began taking orders for its NEO robot in October 2025, at $20,000 or $499 a month, and plans its first deliveries to US customers in 2026. The company itself says that for tasks the robot has not yet learned, its staff can guide it through remote **supervision**. Unitree listed on the Shanghai market in August 2026, yet its net profit fell sharply in the first quarter as spending rose, according to Caixin. More **skeptical** analysts, such as those at Technology.org, add that widely repeated claims of tens of thousands of deployed units do not survive a check against company filings.

7 Three things therefore seem likely, although none is certain. First, robots will probably enter workplaces before homes, because factories and warehouses are structured and easier to control. Second, geopolitics will shape the market: China dominates the volume of industrial robots, with 54 percent of global installations in 2024 according to the International Federation of Robotics, and in July 2026 the US Federal Communications Commission blocked approval of new foreign-made humanoid models. Third, the industry will need to separate **hype** from evidence. Organizers say that the 2027 Games will lean further toward practical tasks, which is a sensible test of whether the promise of household robots that companies **envision** can be met.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**showcase**	_____	**A**	a standard used for comparing performance
2	**benchmark**	_____	**B**	doubtful about whether a claim is true
3	**comparable**	_____	**C**	exaggerated publicity that promises too much
4	**spectacle**	_____	**D**	strong and able to work in hard conditions
5	**dexterity**	_____	**E**	trip or move unsteadily and nearly fall
6	**bottleneck**	_____	**F**	imagine something as a future possibility
7	**autonomy**	_____	**G**	skill in using the hands precisely
8	**stumble**	_____	**H**	similar enough to be fairly compared
9	**robust**	_____	**I**	the ability to act without human control
10	**deploy**	_____	**J**	real and clear enough to be measured
11	**tangible**	_____	**K**	the act of watching and directing others
12	**supervision**	_____	**L**	an impressive public display or event
13	**skeptical**	_____	**M**	a point that limits the speed of progress
14	**hype**	_____	**N**	an event that displays achievements
15	**envision**	_____	**O**	put something into active use in a place

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

autonomy	**benchmark**	**bottleneck**	**comparable**	**deploy**	**dexterity**	**envisions**	**hype**	**robust**
showcase	**skeptical**	**spectacle**	**supervision**	**tangible**				

1 The festival is a _____ for young musicians.

2 The company uses last year's sales as a _____ .

3 The two cities are _____ in size.

4 The fireworks were a _____ that drew thousands.

5 Surgeons need great manual _____ .

6 The narrow bridge is a _____ for traffic.

7 Teenagers often want more _____ from their parents.

8 The system must be _____ enough to work all day.

9 The city will _____ extra police at the festival.

10 The project has produced _____ benefits for the town.

11 The children played under adult _____ .

12 I am _____ about claims that sound too good to be true.

13 The new phone lived up to the _____ .

14 She _____ a school where every child can play outside.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 How did the scale and program of the 2026 Games differ from 2025? What two kinds of event are there?

2 How did the 100-meter time change, and why are the results not comparable with human athletics?

3 What did the scenario events test, and what does the reading suggest about running and hand skills?

4 How do the rules treat autonomy, and why does the difference from remote control matter?

5 What problems did the falls reveal? Summarize the comments of Dennis Hong and Jonathan Hurst.

6 How does the sixth paragraph describe humanoids outside the arena? Give two examples.

7 State the three likely trends in the last paragraph and the reasoning behind each.

8 Why does the writer refer to "hype"? How could the 2027 Games help separate hype from evidence?

9 Evaluate the sources (news agencies, experts, companies, blogs). Which claims are best supported?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"The robots at the Games were controlled by human operators for all events."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that robots will probably be used in workplaces before they are used in homes."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer report the speed records first and the limits of the robots afterward? What effect does this order have on the reader?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** The number of events nearly doubled from 26 in 2025 to 51 in 2026.

2 **T / F** All 51 events at the 2026 Games were scenario-based.

3 **T / F** Tiangong Ultra's 8.64-second 100-meter run was faster than Usain Bolt's 9.58-second record.

4 **T / F** News agencies said the robots' results were directly comparable with human athletics.

5 **T / F** A Reuters report asked whether robots that outrun humans can also plug in a cable.

6 **T / F** Weightlifting and kickboxing required full robot autonomy.

7 **T / F** The robot that set the 8.64-second record crashed into a padded barrier after finishing.

8 **T / F** The reading says Unitree's profit rose sharply in early 2026.

9 **T / F** China accounted for 54 percent of global industrial robot installations in 2024.

10 **T / F** The reading says robots will certainly enter homes before factories.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1 Before reading, what did you imagine a robot Olympics would look like? Did anything in the reading surprise you?

2 The 100-meter time fell from 21.50 to 8.64 seconds in a year. What does such rapid progress suggest, and what does it not show?

3 Why do you think the Games mix sporting contests with scenario-based tasks such as sorting books and charging vehicles?

4 The reading says remote control earned half the points in scenario tasks. Is this a fair way to measure progress in robotics? What alternatives would you propose?

5 Which everyday tasks would you most want a robot to do? Which would you never trust to a robot?

6 A home robot may rely on remote human supervision for unfamiliar tasks. How do you feel about a stranger controlling a robot inside your home?

7 The 1X NEO costs $20,000 or $499 a month. Would you pay that price for a household robot? What would it need to do?

8 Factories and warehouses are structured environments. Why might that make them easier for robots than homes?

9 What are the risks of a robot that cannot stop safely near people? Who should be responsible when a robot causes harm?

10 China accounts for more than half of industrial robot installations, and the United States has restricted new foreign-made humanoids. How might politics shape the spread of robots?

11 The Games are described as a showcase for a national industry. Does this affect how much you trust the results?

12 Skeptical analysts say claims of tens of thousands of deployed humanoids do not survive a check against company filings. How can readers judge claims about new technology?

13 Which jobs might humanoid robots change first, and which might they change least? Give reasons.

14 In ten years, do you think robots will be part of your daily life? Explain what you expect and what would change your mind.

Language Focus: Signaling Contrast and Caution: Yet, Although, and Framing Phrases

Analytical writing signals how a new point relates to the last one. Yet and although introduce a contrast inside a sentence (a result that seems impressive but has a limit). Framing phrases such as outside the arena or in the home switch the setting, so that the reader compares two situations. Therefore marks a conclusion drawn from the evidence.

In the reading:

- "**Yet** news agencies noted that these results are not comparable with human athletics…"
- "Unitree listed on the Shanghai market in August 2026, **yet** its net profit fell sharply in the first quarter…"
- "**Outside the arena**, the picture is more modest."

Practice: Combine with *yet*: *"The robot ran faster than the human record. The result cannot be fairly compared."*

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/robot-olympics

Notes