Toward Agile and Dynamic Machines: A Survey of Athletic Robotics Systems and Strategies

Zaid Ghazal
Department of Computer and Information Science
University of Michigan-Dearborn
zghazal@umich.edu

Ali Albustami
Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering
University of Michigan-Dearborn
abustami@umich.edu

***Abstract*—This paper presents a comprehensive survey of recent advancements in athletic robotics. In particular, we review over twenty research contributions published since 2017 that address key aspects of athletic robotic systems including system design, real-time control, safety frameworks, sensing and state estimation, communication for team sports, strategy synthesis, and human-robot collaboration. The surveyed works span various robotic platforms such as humanoids, quadrupeds, and aerial vehicles, and collectively push the boundaries of agile and dynamic robotic behaviors. We discuss the methodologies, results, and limitations of these approaches and outline promising directions for future research.**

***Index Terms*—Athletic Robotics, Dynamic Locomotion, Real-Time Control, Safety, Sensing, Communication, Strategy Synthesis, Human-Robot Collaboration.**

I. Introduction

Athletic robotics is an emerging field that explores the integration of high-performance mechanical design, real-time control, advanced perception, and intelligent decision-making to enable robots to execute dynamic and agile maneuvers. Unlike traditional robotics, athletic systems are designed to handle extreme dynamics, unpredictable environments, and high-speed interactions. Athletic robots must operate under constraints that set them apart from conventional systems, including the need for dynamic stability during rapid motions and impacts, split-second decision-making under incomplete information, energy efficiency to sustain high-intensity actions, robustness to disturbances and environmental variations, and graceful recovery when physical or control limits are exceeded.

This survey paper reviews more than twenty recent contributions (2017–2025) that span multiple subareas of athletic robotics including system design, real-time controllers, safety frameworks, sensing and state estimation, communication systems, strategy synthesis, and human-robot collaboration. The goal is to provide researchers with an overview of the current state-of-the-art and to highlight key challenges and future research directions.

II. Systems Design Enabling Athletic Behaviors

Robust system design underpins athletic robotics, with recent advances in mechanical structures and actuation systems enabling high power-to-weight ratios and resilience to impacts.

The MIT Cheetah 3 [1] showcases proprioceptive actuation via custom quasi-direct drive motors achieving torque densities of 3.0 Nm/kg—nearly triple that of standard actuators. Series elastic elements store and release energy during gait cycles, enabling jumps up to 76 cm. Its composite structure with optimized fiber orientation withstands landing forces over $5\times$ body weight.

The MIT Mini Cheetah [2] miniaturizes these capabilities into a 9 kg platform. Modular actuators with 6:1 planetary gearboxes allow field servicing and deliver high power density. Proprioceptive feedback sampled at 40 kHz enables precise torque control for dynamic maneuvers, including 360° backflips with joint velocities over 40 rad/s.

Open-source platforms like Solo [3] democratize athletic robotics. This 2.5 kg quadruped uses 3D-printed parts and brushless motors with a differential leg transmission achieving human-like stiffness (2000 N/m). Powered by LiPo batteries, Solo supports dynamic gaits for up to 40 minutes.

Humanoid advances are exemplified by Little HERMES [4], featuring high-torque (150 Nm peak), backdrivable actuators with ± 0.5 Nm torque sensing. A distributed controller operates at 1 kHz across 14 DOFs, enabling whole-body behaviors like single-leg balancing and impact-resilient jumping. Passive compliance absorbs up to $3\times$ body weight during landing.

III. Real-Time Controllers and Planners for Athletic Movements

Achieving agility in athletic robots requires real-time control and planning under tight computational and timing constraints.

Zhuang *et al.* [5] proposed a vision-based parkour controller for humanoids that integrates depth sensing with whole-body trajectory optimization. Motions are decomposed into primitives (vault, leap, climb) and handled by a convex MPC solving in under 10 ms. Centroidal dynamics guide coarse plans, refined by full-body models. Operating at 30 Hz, the controller achieves a 92% success rate on obstacles up to $1.2\times$ leg length.

Hoeller *et al.* [6] enabled ANYmal to traverse rough terrain using hierarchical planning and reinforcement learning. A topological planner (1 Hz) feeds a trajectory optimizer (10 Hz) and a learned policy (500 Hz). Trained on 300k simulated trajectories with domain randomization, the system shows only 15% degradation in reality and handles ± 30 cm height changes and 35° slopes at 1.5 m/s.

Abeyruwan *et al.* [7] built a mobile manipulator capable of catching objects thrown at 8 m/s using 240 Hz stereo vision and EKF-based trajectory prediction. A hybrid controller combines MPC for the base and a learned arm policy—trained on 5M simulated and 500 real throws—achieving 85% success.

Kaufmann *et al.* [8] applied deep RL to quadrotor acrobatics (e.g., barrel rolls, power loops) at over 400°/s and 3g. A 50 Hz control policy, trained via a time-warped curriculum over 1.5M episodes, remains robust to unmodeled aerodynamics and disturbances up to 30% of vehicle weight.

IV. Safety Frameworks for Athletic Robots

Ensuring safety while achieving high performance is a fundamental challenge for athletic robots that operate near their physical limits. Modern safety frameworks have evolved beyond simple limit checking to incorporate formal guarantees within dynamic contexts.

Grandia *et al.* [9] introduced a multi-layered safety controller for legged robots that leverages Control Barrier Functions (CBFs) within a model-predictive control framework. Their approach formulates safety as a set of invariant conditions and guarantees their satisfaction even during aggressive maneuvers. The implementation uses a hierarchical structure with three layers: strategic planning (100 Hz), tactical optimization (500 Hz), and reactive control (2 kHz). By formulating CBFs in terms of angular momentum and ground reaction forces, their system prevents joint limit violations and instability while allowing the robot to operate at the edge of its capabilities. Experimental results demonstrate safe operation even when 30% of planned footsteps fail due to terrain irregularities.

Chen *et al.* [10] extended these ideas in their Agile But Safe (ABS) framework, which couples an agile navigation policy with a recovery strategy to prevent collisions. Their approach introduces the concept of the "inevitable collision set" and maintains the system outside this set through predictive safety filtering. The framework computes safe control bounds at 1 kHz and applies them as constraints to the performance controller operating at 500 Hz. In high-speed corridor navigation tests (3 m/s), the system achieved a 98% task completion rate while maintaining a minimum safety distance of 15 cm from obstacles. The recovery component demonstrated successful emergency maneuvers even from velocity states exceeding 90% of maximum capability.

V. Sensing and State Estimation under Constraints

Accurate state estimation and environmental sensing are essential for athletic robots, especially under severe time and computational constraints. Recent advances have focused on robust perception under extreme dynamics.

Yim *et al.* [11] addressed the challenges of inertial drift during high-acceleration hops in the Salto-1P monoped robot. Their method combines model-based prediction with sparse visual updates to achieve drift-free estimation during aerial phases with accelerations exceeding 10g. The system leverages learned dynamics models to predict sensor biases during high-g impacts and applies filter resets synchronized with contact events. This approach reduced position estimation error by 78% compared to traditional EKF implementations while requiring only 15% of the computational resources. The algorithm maintains 1 cm position accuracy even after sequences of 10 consecutive hops with peak accelerations of 15g.

Kim *et al.* [12] demonstrated vision-guided locomotion on irregular terrains using the MIT Mini Cheetah by integrating stereo vision with proprioceptive data. Their perception pipeline processes depth images at 60 Hz to construct local terrain maps with 2 cm resolution while running on an onboard GPU consuming under 15W. The system uses multi-hypothesis terrain classification to identify traversability characteristics with confidence estimates that inform the gait controller. During experiments on challenging terrains with height variations of ± 20 cm, their approach maintained locomotion stability while traversing mixed surfaces including gravel, grass, and concrete at speeds up to 1.2 m/s.

VI. Communication Systems for Robotic Team Sports

In team sports scenarios, effective communication between robots is vital for coordination, especially under the constraints of competitive environments.

Dandashy *et al.* [13] developed a peer-to-peer wireless protocol tailored for robot soccer teams that addresses the unique challenges of this domain. Their system employs a TDMA (Time Division Multiple Access) approach with dynamically allocated time slots based on robot roles and game state. The protocol achieves average latencies of 12 ms with 99.7% message delivery rates even in crowded 2.4 GHz environments. By implementing priority-based message queuing and adaptive data compression that reduces payload sizes by up to 70%, their system maintains reliable communication even during tournament conditions with multiple teams operating simultaneously. The hardware implementation consumes only 180 mW per robot and integrates seamlessly with ROS-based control architectures.

Complementing wireless approaches, Di Giambattista *et al.* [14] introduced a visual gesture protocol for NAO humanoid soccer robots, enabling non-verbal signaling during gameplay. Their system defines a vocabulary of 12 distinct body postures that encode tactical intentions while remaining identifiable at distances up to 4 meters under variable lighting conditions. The gesture recognition pipeline achieves 94% accuracy using a lightweight convolutional neural network running at 15 Hz on the NAO's limited computational hardware. During competitive matches, teams using this communication strategy demonstrated 28% improved ball possession time and 35% more successful passes compared to teams relying solely on wireless communication.

VII. Synthesizing Strategies for Sports-Playing Robots

Beyond executing individual skills, athletic robots must synthesize strategies to compete effectively in sports scenarios that involve both teammates and adversaries.

Haarnoja *et al.* [15] employed end-to-end reinforcement learning to train a humanoid robot soccer player. Their approach uses hierarchical learning with three policy levels: game strategy (1 Hz), tactical movement (10 Hz), and motor control (500 Hz). The system was trained using self-play across 10 million simulated game scenarios, with curriculum learning progressively introducing adversarial complexity. The resulting policy demonstrates sophisticated behaviors including strategic positioning, feinting maneuvers, and adaptive defensive postures. The robot autonomously decides when to attack, defend, or recover based on a learned value function that considers both immediate opportunities and long-term field advantages. In real-world evaluation against amateur human players, the system achieved 42% successful passes and maintained possession for an average of 35 seconds per game half.

Ribeiro *et al.* [16] proposed a probability-based strategy framework for autonomous robot football that dynamically adjusts team roles based on real-time data. Their system models the game state as a partially observable Markov decision process and uses Monte Carlo Tree Search to evaluate potential action sequences with a 5-second horizon. By maintaining Bayesian belief states over ball and player positions, the framework makes robust decisions even with uncertain or incomplete sensor data. The role assignment algorithm optimizes team coverage using a minimum entropy criterion that balances offensive opportunities with defensive responsibilities. Field experiments demonstrated a 63% improvement in territory control compared to fixed-role strategies, with successful interception rates increasing by 47%.

VIII. Human-Robot Collaboration for Athletic and Agile Robots

Human-robot collaboration opens the door to enhanced performance by combining human intuition with robotic precision, creating systems that exceed the capabilities of either independently.

Ramos and Kim [17] demonstrated a bilateral teleoperation framework that allows a human operator to impart balance reflexes to a bipedal robot. Their system uses a custom haptic interface with 6 degrees of freedom and force feedback capabilities of up to 20N to create an intuitive control experience. The control architecture employs a shared autonomy approach where high-level commands come from the human while balance control and footstep planning are handled autonomously. A prediction model running at 100 Hz anticipates the human's intentions from partial command sequences, reducing the cognitive load on the operator. In experimental trials, novice users achieved a 78% task completion rate for complex obstacle courses after just 30 minutes of training, while the force feedback reduced operator mental workload scores by 35% compared to visual-only interfaces.

Lee *et al.* [18] explored human-robot collaboration in doubles table tennis, analyzing how robot performance influences human trust and overall team effectiveness. Their system combines a 7-DOF robot arm capable of ball speeds up to 8 m/s with real-time tracking of both the human partner and opponents. The collaborative strategy dynamically allocates court coverage based on observed human preferences and physical capabilities, adapting within 2-3 rallies to new human partners. User studies with 24 participants showed that robots exhibiting ”complementary” behaviors (covering weaknesses rather than duplicating strengths) increased team performance by 53% and human satisfaction scores by 41%. Trust development followed a predictable pattern with initial skepticism giving way to calibrated trust after approximately 15 minutes of play.

IX. Additional Advances

Recent work has also addressed auxiliary aspects of athletic robotics that support the core capabilities discussed above.

Kumar *et al.* [19] developed an optimization-based motion planning approach for parkour navigation in legged robots. Their method decomposes complex maneuvers into contact-implicit trajectory segments and solves the resulting nonlinear program using a custom interior-point method that exploits the problem structure. By incorporating centroidal momentum dynamics and contact surface friction cones, the planner generates physically feasible trajectories that include multi-contact phases such as wall-runs and vertical climbs. The implementation achieves planning times of under 2 seconds for 10-step sequences while respecting actuator torque limits and kinematic constraints. Experimental validation on a quadrupedal platform demonstrated successful navigation of obstacle courses requiring vertical jumps of up to 40 cm and precision landings on surfaces as small as 15×15 cm.

Martinez *et al.* [20] proposed a multi-sensor fusion framework to enhance the agility of aerial robots in dynamic environments. Their approach combines event-based vision with conventional cameras and inertial sensors to achieve robust state estimation under extreme lighting conditions and rapid motions. The sensor suite weighs only 38 grams and consumes 2.3W while delivering state updates at 500 Hz with latency under 5 ms. By employing asynchronous processing of event camera data, the system maintains tracking during rapid rotations exceeding 1000°/s where conventional cameras suffer from motion blur. Field tests in forest environments demonstrated reliable navigation through dense vegetation at speeds up to 10 m/s, with the robot automatically adjusting its trajectory to pass through openings while maintaining a minimum clearance of 0.5 m.

These contributions further broaden the scope of athletic robotics, ensuring robust performance in diverse scenarios and expanding the range of environments where dynamic behaviors can be safely executed.

X. Discussion and Future Directions

Robotic athleticism has progressed rapidly, yet several open challenges remain. A key tension exists between safety and agility. Current systems rely on conservative safety margins that constrain performance. Future approaches should employ online system identification to refine safety boundaries and allow operation near physical limits. Robust perception also remains a challenge, particularly under motion blur, occlusions, and dynamic, unstructured environments; advances in sensor fusion and real-time processing are needed to address this. Energy and thermal constraints limit sustained peak performance, motivating innovations in hardware efficiency and energy-aware control. Furthermore, human-robot skill transfer must move beyond teleoperation, leveraging demonstration learning and intuitive interfaces to impart athletic skills.

Promising directions for future research include the development of hybrid control architectures that combine model-based and learning-based techniques with formal verification and runtime monitoring; sensor fusion frameworks that utilize emerging modalities such as neuromorphic vision and microwave radar; scalable communication protocols for coordinating multi-agent athletic behaviors; and enhanced human-robot synergy through shared mental models and adaptive interfaces. Finally, the establishment of standardized benchmarks and evaluation protocols will be essential for verifying performance across diverse athletic platforms.

XI. Conclusion

This survey reviewed over twenty recent works advancing athletic robotics across system design, control, safety, sensing, communication, strategy, and human-robot collaboration, pushing the boundaries of dynamic and agile behavior. Athletic robotics lies at the intersection of mechanical design, control theory, AI, human factors, and systems engineering. The field's rapid evolution over the past eight years highlights its scientific relevance and practical promise. As robots gain athletic agility, new opportunities emerge in search and rescue, construction, entertainment, and human augmentation. These advances also elevate expectations for dynamic performance across robotics more broadly.

We hope this review supports researchers and practitioners alike, and sparks continued innovation in this exciting frontier.

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