

The Time of the Gladiator as Relived in the Machine Age

Television • On Comedy Central's daffy 'BattleBots,' lethally outfitted gadgets fight to the 'death.'

By LARRY McSHANE
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NEW YORK—Three things you will learn from watching the new series "BattleBots":

- 1) San Francisco is "the Mecca of robot fighting." (Who knew?)
- 2) Bottle-blond hair with a dark goatee is not a good look.
- 3) A 210-pound robot topped by a whirring, spinning wheel of death can cause an awful lot of damage in just 46 seconds.

These truths will become self-evident tonight at 10:30 p.m. with the latest edition of "BattleBots" on Comedy Central. The contest—think mechanical cockfighting—pits homemade robots in a fight to the "death."

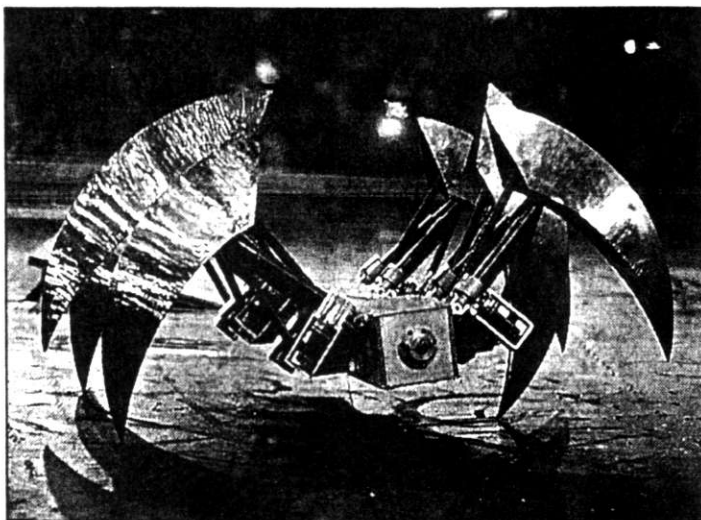
Death, in this case, involves a lot of flying sparks, dangling wires and dismembered wheels as two robots enter the plexiglass-encased BattleBox. Only one emerges as the winner.

The robots are divided by weight class, as in boxing. But overall, this sport bears little resemblance to any other.

Inside the 48-foot-by-48-foot BattleBox, the contestants are subject to random attacks that are part of the game: tungsten-tipped buzz saws and spikes that pop up from the floor, disappearing ramps dubbed "hell-raisers," slamming sledgehammers.

The matches are (1) held in San Francisco. They are (2) co-hosted by Bill Dwyer. And in one upcoming match, a robot dubbed the Mauler (3) demolished an over-matched challenger named Nightmare in under a minute.

"We are committed to restoring your faith in uncensored acts of extreme violence," the goateed



Business Wire

An angry-looking machine prepares for war on "BattleBots."

Dwyer says at one point—his hyperbole nowhere near as distracting as his near-white hair.

Dwyer teams with ex-NFL quarterback Sean Salisbury to announce the three-minute matches, which are mixed with behind-the-scenes looks at the robots and their creators.

The show was arranged as a single-elimination tournament—no surprise, since losers sometimes end up looking like a piece of battered stereo equipment at a trailer-park yard sale. The winner collects a \$5,000 prize.

The robots' creators, most of them disturbingly normal-looking, operate their machines by remote control. Their electronic spawn conjures visions of something strange—say, Charlie Manson with a really twisted Erector set.

Lisa Winters, 14, of Monona, Wis., appears with her creation, Tentoumushi—a robot with an exterior designed to look like a ladybug and an interior highlighted by a tiny, killer buzz saw.

Then there's the Mauler. The 210-pound robot resembles an oversized tuna fish can run amok; instead of a lid, it features a wildly whirring horizontal buzz saw.

Bzzzz! Bzzzz! In barely 46 sec-

onds, it sheared off the wheels of its challenger and won its match. Celebrating were the Mauler's inventors: Charles Tilford and his two sons, Morgan and Henry.

In a show of 21st century family values, Dad uses a pre-fight interview to explain the clan's intentions: "Total robotic domination worldwide."

Happy Father's Day, eh?

The names of the robots often suggest the violence to come: There's Vlad the Impaler, Dead Blow, Killerhurtz, Diesector. The show's announcers gleefully celebrate the carnage too.

"Tonight, right before your very eyes, you're going to see real live

robots fight to the death," Salisbury intoned two weeks ago in a special preseason show dubbed "Prelude to War."

It's over-the-top yet tongue-in-cheek. Ringside interviewers Donna D'Errico ("Baywatch") and twins Randy and Jason Sklar provide most of the latter attribute.

In one snippet, D'Errico talks to a contestant with a British accent so broad that it seems he's singing "God Save the Queen."

"What's that accent?" she asks. "Are you from England?"

"I'm from Oxford," the interviewee responds.

"Awesome," she rejoins.

Looking strangely out of place, in a bow tie and black vest, is technical expert Bill Nye "The Science Guy." But make no mistake, this new show is not about anything deeper than killer robots going head-to-head.

The program is somewhat marred by gratuitous vulgarities that occasionally (and inexplicably) pop up from time to time. Better just to let Salisbury and Dwyer, in a style copped from the WWF, sound off about their game.

"Catchy phrases don't win fights," color commentator Dwyer advises at one point. "Nasty, maniacal weapons win fights."

And if this crack by Dwyer isn't the official cry of the BattleBots, it certainly should be:

"When sparks fly, robots die!"

Rest in pieces.