

FORECASTING SEVERE THUNDERSTORMS:
A BRIEF CONSIDERATION OF
SOME ACCEPTED TECHNIQUES

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ABSTRACT

Three case studies of significant thunderstorm episodes are used to demonstrate that classic severe thunderstorm forecast guidelines work well within strongly baroclinic synoptic settings and also to show that outbreaks of intense severe thunderstorms can also occur within considerably more benign large-scale environments. It is suggested that criteria for monitoring the severe thunderstorm threat within weakly baroclinic environments need to be developed and several possible approaches are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since March of 1948, when operational severe thunderstorm forecasting first began (3), many forecast techniques have been developed and utilized. Most of these techniques have their origins in semi-empirical research from the late 1940s to the late 1950s (4, 5, 6, 7, 8). By the end of that period, a serious division had developed between the research and forecasting elements of meteorology (9). While many of the methods developed during the formative period of severe thunderstorm forecasting have their origins in sound physical principles, few have been subjected to a rigorous scientific examination in light of recent advances in our understanding. The advent of computer models has been accompanied by a trend away from synoptic meteorology and toward increasing dependence on numerical guidance (10). Regrettably, many valuable insights have been lost in the process, and forecasting severe thunderstorms has largely been separated from basic physical understanding. The original studies suggest many useful avenues of applied research which have been forgotten, or at least de-emphasized. Instead, many of these topics have been translated into forecasting "rules" which are often presented without accompanying physical reasoning.

In his severe storm forecasting manual Miller (3) presented a summary of important parameters and suggested guidelines for rating the intensity of these paramet-

ers. A simplified version of his guidelines is shown in Table 1. It should be quite obvious that these rules (as well as most of the other works cited above) key upon the highly baroclinic synoptic setting (predominantly in the spring) that leads to widespread outbreaks of severe thunderstorms and tornadoes. Indeed, these are just the type situations that are handled best (11) by forecasters at the National Severe Storms Forecast Center (NSSFC). However, it is well documented that significant severe thunderstorm episodes often occur within relatively weak large-scale meteorological settings (12, 13, 14, 15, 16). Thus, the forecaster must be extremely cautious if general guidelines, such as those of Table 1, are used to evaluate the severe thunderstorm threat. In particular, it must be realized that generally accepted rules apply

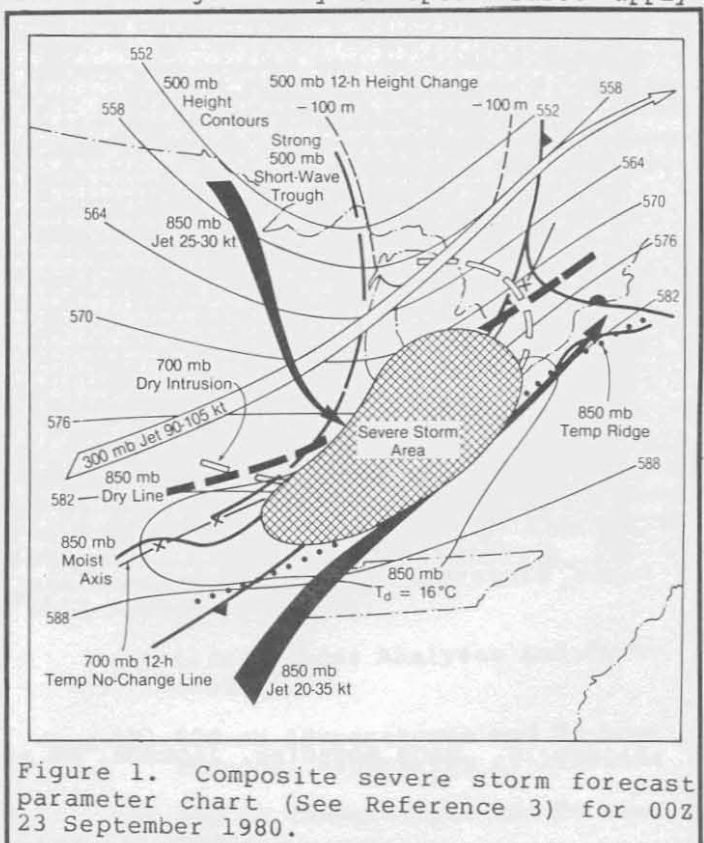


Figure 1. Composite severe storm forecast parameter chart (See Reference 3) for 00Z 23 September 1980.

to one particular type of severe storm environment. Three specific storm events are examined in the next section and the Table 1 guidelines are evaluated for each case. These are chosen to illustrate one situation where the guidelines apply well and two situations where they do not. We suggest several alternate forecasting parameters that seem to be important in cases of weak synoptic forcing.

2. EVALUATION OF THREE SEVERE STORM EVENTS

2.1 The Case of 22/23 September 1980

During the afternoon of 22 September 1980 a strong cold front pushed through the mid-Mississippi Valley and lower Great Lakes Region accompanied by an intense, pre-frontal squall line. Numerous severe storms were reported and property damage was widespread; however, Storm Data accounts indicated only 16 personal inju-

ries. A composite chart for 00Z on the 23rd is shown in Figure 1 and an evaluation of the strength of the parameters from Table 1 is presented in Table 2 for both 12Z on the 22nd and 00Z on the 23rd. Both the composite and Table 2 show this to be a "classic" severe storm episode (despite its occurrence in the fall rather than in the spring!) with all but 3 of the parameters reaching Miller's "strong" level by 00Z. The only characteristics of this event that do not fit the classic pattern are: the moderate levels of instability, the lack of intersecting low-level and upper-level jets (note that the low-level southwesterly jet is essentially parallel to the upper-level jet (17)), the moist axis and temperature ridge were coincident and the strongest 500 mb height falls occurred to the north and northwest of the storm area. Obviously, these slight deficiencies were more than compensated for by the overall intensity of the synoptic setting.

TABLE 1 - SUMMARY OF KEY PARAMETERS
(after Miller, 1967)

RANK	PARAMETER	WEAK (W)	MODERATE (M)	STRONG (S)
1	500 mb vorticity Advection	Neutral or NVA	PVA-Contours Cross Vorticity Pattern $\leq 30^\circ$	PVA - Contours Cross Vorticity Pattern $> 30^\circ$
2	Stability - Totals Index	TI ≤ 50	50 $<$ TI ≤ 55	TI > 55
3	500 MB wind speed	WS ≤ 35 kt	35 $<$ WS ≤ 50 kt	WS > 50 kt
4	300 - 200 MB wind speed (upper-level max)	WS ≤ 55 kt	55 $<$ WS ≤ 85 kt	WS > 85 kt
5	850 MB wind speed	WS ≤ 20 kt	20 $<$ WS < 35 kt	WS ≥ 35 kt
6	850 MB Dewpoint	T _d $\leq 8^\circ\text{C}$	8 $<$ T _d $\leq 12^\circ\text{C}$	T _d $> 12^\circ\text{C}$
7	850 MB Temp Ridge Location	East of Moist axis	Over moist axis	West of moist axis
8	700 MB Temp No Change Line (12-h)	Winds cross line $\leq 20^\circ$	Winds cross line > 20 and $\leq 40^\circ$	Winds cross line $> 40^\circ$
9	700 MB Dry Intrusion	Not available or weak 700 MB winds	Winds from dry to moist intrude at angle of $< 40^\circ$ and are ≥ 15 kt	Winds intrude at an angle of $\geq 40^\circ$ and are ≥ 25 kt
10	12-h Surface Pressure Fall	< 1 MB	1 to 5 MB	> 5 MB
11	500 MB Height Change (12-h)	< 30 M	≥ 30 M and ≤ 60 M	> 60 M
12	Surface Pressure over threat area	≥ 1010 MB	< 1010 MB and ≥ 1005 MB	< 1005 MB
13	Surface Dewpoint	T _d $\leq 55^\circ\text{F}$	55 $<$ T _d $< 65^\circ\text{F}$	T _d $\geq 65^\circ\text{F}$

2.2 The case of 19/20 April 1981

During the evening of 19 April 1981 several tornadoes struck Tulsa, Oklahoma, and its suburbs. Although only a few severe storms were reported, the tornadoes were quite strong and produced heavy property damage with 57 people injured and 5 deaths. A composite chart for 00Z on the 20th is shown in Figure 2 and an evaluation of the strength of the parameters from Table 1 is presented in Table 3. Note that even though this event occurred during April, the synoptic setting was quite weak. The severe storms occurred in conjunction with a weak short-wave trough at 500 mb that was moving eastward beneath a pronounced blocking ridge. The 850 mb moist axis and temperature ridge were positioned south and east of the storm area. Many of the "classic" severe storm features were either not present or were rated only as weak. However, the low-level moisture indicators were strong and the surface pattern was very favorable (18, 19, 20). Although very significant severe thunderstorms occurred, an evaluation of the situation based upon the parameter table provides few clues to the forecaster.

2.3 The case of 3/4 June 1980

During the evening of 3 June 1980 severe thunderstorms struck eastern Nebraska; the most significant storm spawned at least 6 tornadoes in the Grand Island area. Storm

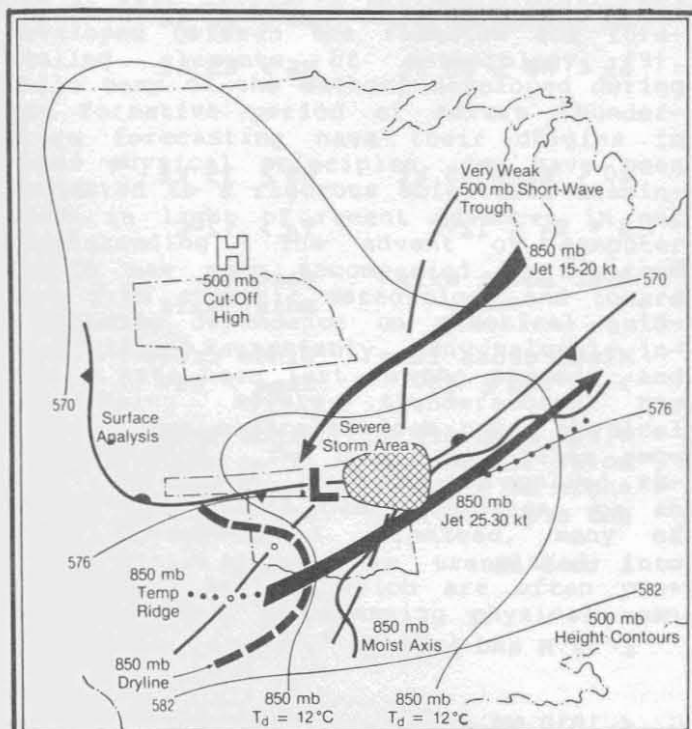


Figure 2. Composite severe storm forecast parameter chart (See Reference 3) for 00Z 20 April 1981.

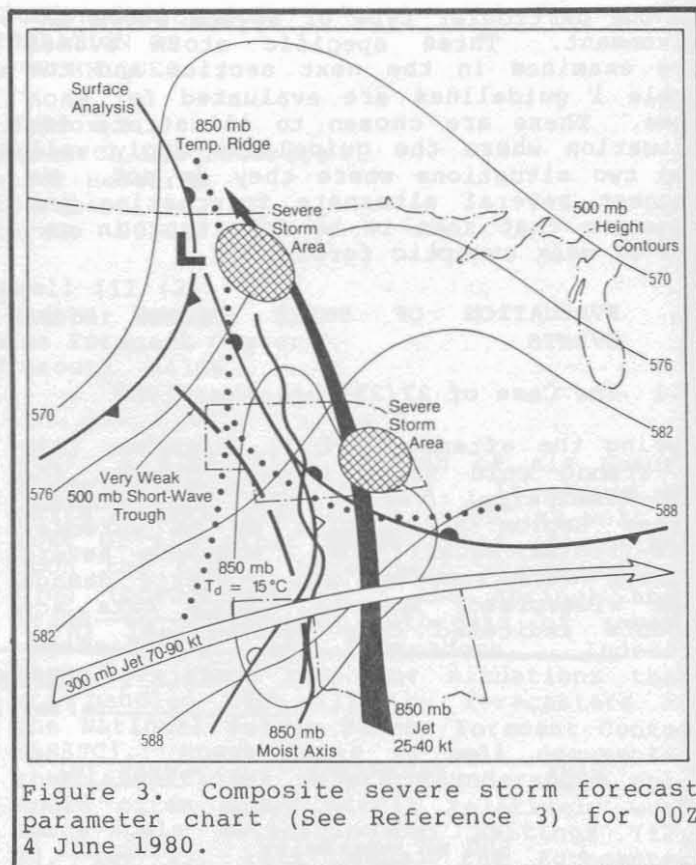


Figure 3. Composite severe storm forecast parameter chart (See Reference 3) for 00Z 4 June 1980.

Data reports indicate, in addition to very heavy property damage, more than 200 injuries and 5 deaths. Once again, although the region affected by severe storms was not particularly large, the storms were highly significant. A composite chart for 00Z on the 4th is shown in Figure 3, with an evaluation of the strength of the parameters from Table 1 presented in Table 4. This event's synoptic setting was also quite weak, especially in contrast to the "classic" severe storm setting. Note that the severe storms (a second area of severe storms over the Dakotas is not discussed here) occurred as a very weak short-wave trough moved through the large-scale ridge position and approached a surface warm front (again a very favorable surface pattern for tornadic storms (20)). The orientation of both of the 850 mb temperature and moisture axes were much different than those described by Miller as being conducive to severe storms. Although upper- and lower-jets intersected, the severe storms occurred considerably north of the upper-jet and to the northwest of a well defined speed maximum in the upper-jet. Again, many of the classic features and parameters were either lacking or were quite weak. Most notable were the very high low-level moisture contents and the extreme instability (note that the dramatic changes from morning to evening make it all the more difficult for the forecaster to recognize this situation's potential threat).

