

Meet Tim Samaras and Roger Hill, two of the country's most lauded weather geeks—and daredevils.

By Peter Bronski

Storm Chasers

EVERY YEAR AN AVERAGE OF 1,200 TORNADOES batter the United States. Most occur in Tornado Alley, a weather-beaten swath of middle America that stretches from Texas north to the Dakotas. But in any given year, at least 25, and as many as 60 or more, will touch down on the plains east of Denver, making Colorado the ninth most active state for tornadoes. Colorado, in fact, is home to its own miniature Tornado Alley, which begins near Greeley, runs south past Denver International Airport, and ends over the Palmer Divide somewhere near Kiowa.

Denver, as the gateway to both alleys, has become a major hub for the fast-growing science and sport of storm chasing. The idea is to get up close and personal with the nation's most severe weather—without getting clobbered by hail or sucked into a twister. And the Mile-High City is home to two men who do it better than most anyone in the country: Tim Samaras and Roger Hill.

Samaras, a 47-year-old senior research engineer at Applied Research Associates in Littleton, started chasing tornadoes more than 15 years ago, though his interest dates back to early childhood. “It probably started when I was 6 or 7 years old, with *The Wizard of Oz*,” he says. “That was a pretty impressive tornado... But once the house fell down in Munchkin Land, I fell asleep and wasn't interested anymore.”

It wasn't until 2002 that Samaras burst onto the national scene, when he did what no storm chaser had done before—successfully placed a custom probe (designed to take scientific measurements of the inside of a tornado) in the path of a twister. People took notice, including the folks at National Geographic, who funded Samaras to go out and try to do it again in 2003.

Amazingly, he did—many times. “The big one that stood out” was a June 24, 2003,



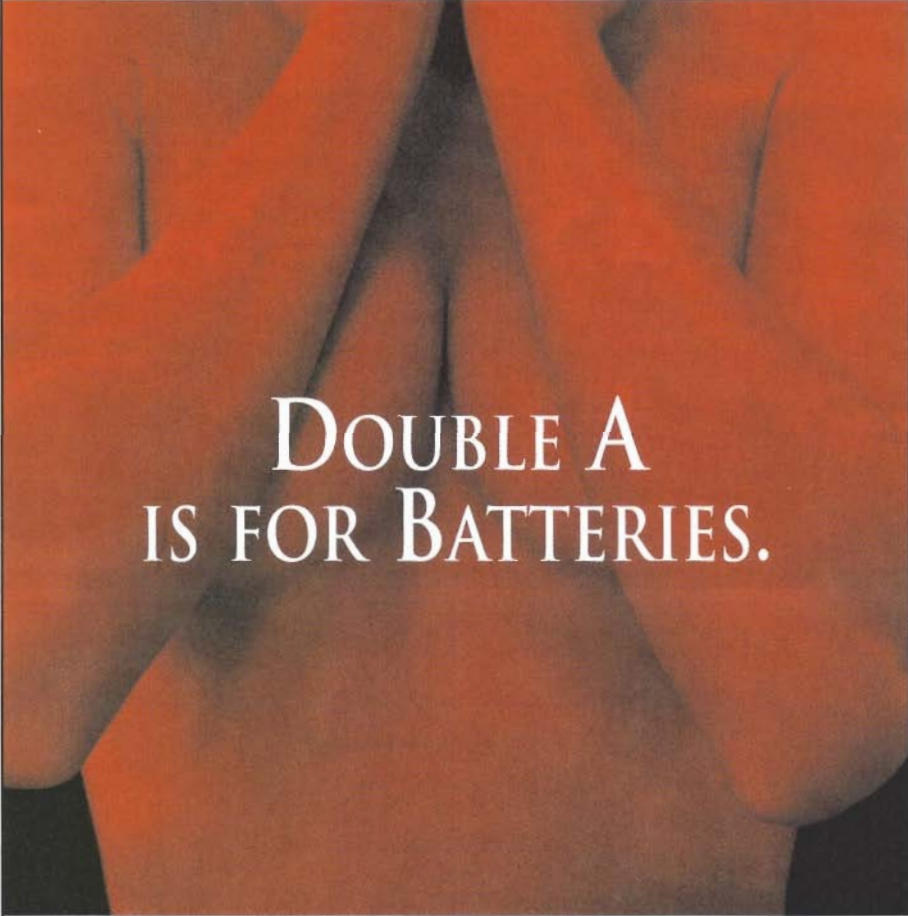
TWISTED SISTER The life of a professional tornado chaser is a combination of science, fascination, and sport.

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Samaras and Hill

tornado near Manchester, South Dakota. The monster F-4 tornado (measured on the Fujita Scale of Tornado Intensity, with winds between 207 and 260 miles per hour) leveled the town before passing over Samaras' probe. "When we dropped the probe, we were exactly 80 seconds from that tornado crossing our path exactly where we stood," he says. "It was probably 200 yards away. We could see individual two-by-fours; some of the debris was almost overhead."

What's it like getting within spitting distance of a big tornado? "It sounds like a waterfall being powered by a jet engine," says Samaras. "The other thing that's really quite strong is the odor of cut vegetation, because if you can imagine a tornado going through a cornfield, it's basically leveling the corn just like a lawn mower."

When Samaras downloaded the probe's data, he was amazed to discover a 100-millibar drop in barometric pressure—the greatest ever recorded (landing him in the *Guinness Book of World Records*). The change in pressure is the equivalent of sitting on the beach on a clear, sunny day and being instantaneously transported into the eye of a Category 5 hurricane. One year later, in 2004, Samaras bested himself again using a new probe that contained seven video cameras. "We probably collected the first-ever video of the inside of a tornado," he says. This year, adding one more notch to his belt, *National Geographic* named Samaras an Emerging Explorer for 2005.

Hill, for his part, has made an equally prestigious name for himself as one of America's most successful storm chasers. Not counting this 2005 season, he's witnessed 241 tornadoes, including a personal record of 51 last year, and he's got video of each and every one to prove it. His reputation for capturing tornadoes on film has made him the most sought-after man in severe weather footage. The Weather Channel, ABC, CNN, FOX, *National Geographic*, "Good Morning America," "Inside Edition," "Storm Stories," and "Entertainment Weekly" have all aired Hill's videos.

Hill and Samaras paths crossed in 1998 during a chance meeting in Samaras' living room. "I decided to get a group of friends together in January, order a pizza, have a few beers, and watch [tornado] videos—that's what storm chasers do in the off season," says Samaras. Hill came as a friend of a friend, and he and Samaras immediately

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Denver People **Tim Samaras and Roger Hill**



MISTER TWISTERS Roger Hill and Tim Samaras are Denver's resident tornado experts. Combined, they have more than 30 years' experience chasing, studying, and outrunning storms.

hit it off. The annual off-season video gathering eventually grew so large that Samaras could no longer host it at his house, and he and Hill teamed up to move it to a local hotel. The Denver Storm Chasing Convention was born, and has since grown into the country's top storm-chasing conference, attracting the top scientists and professional chasers from across the United States—more than 200 of them in all this year.

Like Samaras, Hill enjoys getting close to big tornadoes. "I want to see into it with my eyes," he says. "Just keep your engine warm and never shut it off, that's for sure." Indeed, Hill has had his share of close calls. "Last year there was a very large tornado near Beaver City, Nebraska. There was baseball-sized hail. The tornado was three-quarters of a mile wide. You could hear the roar. A second tornado touched down right in front of us. Debris—pieces of trees—were hitting us. We jumped into the van as the tornado hit a farmhouse right next to the highway... We had 20 or 30 seconds to get away before it would have hit us."

While they make good stories, close calls are the exception rather than the rule. Hill's 18 years of experience and his uncanny intuition for predicting weather mean that, more often than not, he's in the right place at the

right time, and safe—exactly where he wants to be. "It's 75 percent forecasting and experience, and 25 percent total luck," he says. "The mystery of meteorology is you can't be sure. There's great satisfaction in making a forecast and seeing it come true."

As a full-time storm chaser, Hill is on the road anytime there's a chance for severe weather, racking up an average of 70,000 miles of driving per year. That includes the prime months of May and June, when tornadoes are most common. Hill makes the rounds as co-owner of Silver Lining Tours, a commercial storm-chasing company that runs tours out of Denver and Oklahoma City, offering inexperienced amateurs and vacationers a way to safely venture in search of their own tornado rendezvous. The tours have become incredibly popular in the wake of movies like *Twister* and *The Day After Tomorrow*, Hill says.

"The first time you see a tornado up close, especially a big one, it's a life-changing event," he says. "Storm chasing is one of the last frontiers. It's unconquerable." ▲

Peter Bronski is a freelance writer who lives in Boulder. His childhood home in Long Island, New York, of all places, has been ravaged by tornadoes twice.