STELLAR ACTIVITY AT THE END OF THE MAIN SEQUENCE: GHRS OBSERVATIONS OF THE M8 Ve STAR VB 10

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ABSTRACT

We present Goddard High Resolution Spectrograph observations of the M8 Ve star VB 10 (=Gl 752B), located very near the end of the stellar main sequence, and its dM3.5 binary companion Gl 752A. These coeval stars provide a test bed for studying whether the outer atmospheres of stars respond to changes in internal structure as stars become fully convective near mass 0.3 $M_\odot$ (about spectral type M5), where the nature of the stellar magnetic dynamo presumably changes, and near the transition from red to brown dwarfs near mass 0.08 $M_\odot$ (about spectral type M9), when hydrogen burning ceases at the end of the main sequence. We obtain upper limits for the quiescent emission of VB 10 but observe a transition region spectrum during a large flare, which indicates that some type of magnetic dynamo must be present. Two indirect lines of evidence—scaling from the observed X-ray emission and scaling from a time-resolved flare on AD Leo—suggest that the fraction of the stellar bolometric luminosity that heats the transition region of VB 10 outside of obvious flares is comparable to, or larger than, that for Gl 752A. This suggests an increase in the magnetic heating rates, as measured by $L_x/L_{bol}$ ratios, across the radiative/convective core boundary and as stars approach the red/brown dwarf boundary. These results provide new constraints for dynamo models and models of coronal and transition-region heating in late-type stars.

Subject headings: binaries: visual — stars: activity — stars: flare — stars: individual (VB 10) — stars: interiors — stars: late-type — X-rays: stars

1. INTRODUCTION

Two fundamental changes in the internal structure of stars occur near the end of the hydrogen-burning main sequence. With decreasing stellar mass and $T_{eff}$, the radiative core shrinks until, for masses below about 0.3 $M_\odot$ (corresponding to $T_{eff} = 3400$ K or spectral type M5), stars are fully convective (see Dorman, Nelson, & Chau 1989). This structural change is important because the shell-type $\pi$-$\omega$ magnetic dynamo described by Parker (1979) and others, which is thought to amplify magnetic fields in solar-type stars, requires radial differential rotation. The important result from helioseismology that the solar convective zone has nearly constant angular velocity with depth led Parker (1993) and others to place the radial differential rotation that creates toroidal magnetic fields (the "$\omega$-effect") not in the convective zone but rather in a layer of about 0.03 $R_\odot$ thickness at the top of the radiative zone. It is not presently known whether the $\omega$-dynamo or another type of dynamo—for example, the "distributive" dynamo discussed in general terms by Rosner (1980)—can operate in fully convective stars. However, Durney, De Young, & Roxburgh (1993) showed that fully convective stars can generate turbulent but not global magnetic fields.

As one proceeds further down the main sequence to $0.076 \leq M_\star/M_\odot \leq 0.080$ (near spectral type M9), depending on the assumed equation of state, solar composition stars can no longer support stable hydrogen burning (Dorman et al. 1989; Burrows, Hubbard, & Lunine 1994). Such stars are commonly called brown dwarfs, although a candidate brown dwarf has yet to be identified with certainty.

Although it is not presently possible to study these changes in internal structure directly, the properties of stellar magnetic fields and the magnetic heating of the outer atmospheric layers may be proxy indicators of structural changes occurring deep inside the stars. To test this hypothesis, Barbera et al. (1993) analyzed X-ray observations of all K and M stars within 25 pc that were observed by the Einstein Observatory imaging proportional counter (IPC). Although this data set is biased by the requirements of the individual pointings and there are only a few late M dwarf detections and upper limits, Barbera et al. found a definite trend of lower X-ray luminosities for the lower mass fully convective stars compared to the higher mass M dwarfs with radiative cores. This result can arise simply from the rapid decrease in stellar radius with decreasing mass combined with a roughly constant X-ray surface flux (see, e.g., Fleming et al. 1993; Fleming, Schmitt, & Giampapa 1995). Barbera et al. also claimed to find a drop in the mean X-ray surface flux across the boundary between the early M dwarfs with radiative cores and the fully convective lower mass stars, but the evidence that they presented is only marginal.

Fleming et al. (1995) and Schmitt, Fleming, & Giampapa (1995) came to a different conclusion in their analysis of the ROSAT all-sky survey and pointed observations of all known K and M stars within 7 pc of the Sun. Using $L_x/L_{bol}$ as a...
measure of coronal heating efficiency, they found no difference between typical values for the early and late M-type stars, which indicates that coronal magnetic heating rates are insensitive to changes in the internal structures of the stars, at least at the level detectable by ROSAT. Moreover, the increased sensitivity of ROSAT yielded more detections among lower mass stars in contrast to the paucity of detections available in the Einstein data set. ROSAT did not detect any stars later than M7; however, so they could not extend their results to the lowest mass stars. Fleming et al. (1993) came to similar conclusions in their analysis of all known dwarfs later than M5 in the ROSAT survey and pointed observations.

2. THE TARGET STARS VB 10 GI 752A

We have obtained ultraviolet spectra of the dM3.5 and M8 Vc stars in the GI 752 binary system in order to study possible differences in the amount of plasma heated to 10^6 K in the outer atmospheres of two stars with the same age but different internal structure. GI 752A has a radiative core, while GI 752B (also known as VB 10) is fully convective and lies very close to the end of the hydrogen-burning main sequence. GI 752B is the faintest (mV = 17.38) and coolest dwarf star yet observed with the Goddard High Resolution Spectrograph (GRS).

Liebert & Probst (1987) have reviewed the properties of low-mass M dwarfs. Using optical and infrared photometry, Bertram, Reid, & Leggett (1992) derived an effective temperature and luminosity of T_{eff} = 3240 K and log (L/L_☉) = −1.49 for GI 752A. Kirkpatrick et al. (1993) derived a temperature and luminosity of T_{eff} = 2875 K and log (L/L_☉) = −3.31 for VB 10, by comparison of the observed spectrum with model atmospheres. Tinney, Mould, & Reid (1993) used infrared photometry to determine the absolute bolometric magnitude of VB 10. M_{bol} = 13.13, corresponding to log (L/L_☉) = −3.36. Newer model atmosphere calculations with a better representation of the H₂O opacity led Allard et al. (1994) to revise the temperature for VB 10 down to T_{eff} = 2800 K. Most recently, Allard & Hauschildt (1995) obtained an even lower temperature, T_{eff} = 2600 K, by matching the observed near-IR spectrum with model atmospheres using new TiO opacities.

We now derive stellar radii from the relation

\[ 5 \log \left( \frac{R}{R_\odot} \right) = M_{bol, \odot} - M_{bol, \star} - 10 \log \left( \frac{T_{eff, \odot}}{T_{eff, \star}} \right). \]  

Adopting M_{bol, \odot} = 4.72 (based on M_{F, \odot} = 4.83 [Bessell 1991]) and BC_☉ = −0.11, which is uncertain, M_{bol, VB 10} = 13.13, and M_{bol, GI 752A} = 8.54 (Kirkpatrick et al. 1993), we derive radii for GI 752A and VB 10 of 0.546 and 0.102 R_☉, respectively. The sensitivity of the derived stellar radii to the assumed value of T_{eff} is indicated by R_{VB 10} decreasing from 0.102 to 0.080 R_☉ when T_{eff} is raised from 2600 to 2800 K.

The mass of VB 10 is not known directly because it is a member of a long-period binary system. Henry & McCarthy (1993) list it among low-luminosity dwarfs with colors that suggest, following their empirical mass-luminosity relations, a mass in the range of 0.08–0.09 M_☉. The theoretical mass-luminosity relations for different assumed equations of state (see Dorman et al. 1989) also indicate a VB 10 mass of about 0.09 M_☉.

We derive the ratio of surface flux to observed flux, F/\Phi = 2.17 \times 10^{17} for GI 752A and 6.23 \times 10^{18} for VB 10, from the stellar radii and the 5.74 ± 0.16 pc distance to GI 752 (Harrington, Kallarakal, & Dahn 1983). The stellar properties of GI 752A and VB 10 are summarized in Table 1. For comparison we also list the properties of AU Mic (Linsky & Wood 1994), which is among the most active of the M dwarfs with very bright transition-region ultraviolet emission lines (Linsky et al. 1982) and the largest X-ray luminosity of any M dwarf within 10 pc.

The inferred radius for VB 10 is very similar to that of Jupiter (R_J = 0.1024 R_☉; Allen 1973, p. 140). This is not unreasonable, however, because the theoretical calculations of Burrows, Hubbard, & Lunine (1989) predict that stars near the lower hydrogen-burning mass limit (M ≈ 0.08 M_☉) should have radii of about 0.08 R_☉ (see also Fig. 1 in Burrows & Liebert 1993). VB 10 is certainly near this limit. Kirkpatrick & McCarthy (1994) raise the possibility that stars with spectral types M7 and later are, in fact, below this limit; thus, VB 10 could conceivably be a brown dwarf.

X-ray emission from GI 752A was detected by the Einstein IPC at a level of log L_X = 27.25 (Barbera et al. 1993) and by the ROSAT Position Sensitive Proportional Counter (PSPC) at a level of log L_X = 26.71 (Schmitt et al. 1995). Since (for the IPC data) log (L_X/L_{bol}) = −4.80, nearly 2 orders of magnitude below the “saturated” heating level [log (L_X/L_{bol}) ≈ 10^{-3}; see, e.g., Fleming et al. 1995, their Fig. 1a, and Gagné, Caillault, & Stauffer 1995], GI 752A is relatively inactive. Fleming et al. (1993) provided an upper limit of log L_X < 25.54 (L_X/L_{bol} < −6.48) for VB 10 based on a long pointed ROSAT PSPC observation, but Barbera et al. (1993) cited an Einstein HRI detection corresponding to log L_X = 26.34 in the IPC band. The corresponding value of log (L_X/L_{bol}) = −3.88 is an order of magnitude larger than that of GI 752A, which suggests an increase rather than a decrease in the coronal heating efficiency across the radiative/nonradiative boundary. The X-ray detection of VB 10 with the HRI, but not the IPC or the PSPC, suggests variability or flaring. T. A. Fleming (1994, private communication) has looked at the underexposed 9.1 ks HRI data set. Fleming et al. (1993) did not detect any stars later than M7, however, so they could not extend their results to the lowest mass stars. Fleming et al. (1993) came to similar conclusions in their analysis of all known dwarfs later than M5 in the ROSAT survey and pointed observations.

The amount of H₂ absorption or emission indicates the chromospheric heating rate, which is correlated with stellar kinematic properties and thus age (e.g., Giampapa & Liebert 1986). GI 752A shows a modest H₂ absorption equivalent width of 0.49 Å (Panagia, Byrne, & Houdebine 1991), which indicates a relatively low amount of heating for stars of its
that the distance traveled by a sound wave in a fluid is about \(0.1R\). We note that the distance traveled by a sound wave in a fluid is about \(0.1R\).

Thus, the \(1.05\) K flaring plasma covered a large fraction of the stellar photosphere. In Table 4 we compare the ratios of the line luminosity to the bolometric luminosity, \(L_{\text{line}}/L_{\text{bol}}\), for the GI 752A stars to those for the quiet Sun, AU Mic, and the fully convective dM5.5e star, Proxima Centauri, observed outside of obvious flares using the \(IUE\) fluxes tabulated by Linsky et al. (1982). We intercompare these stars using \(L_{\text{line}}/L_{\text{bol}}\) because this ratio measures the heating efficiency where the line is formed, but, unlike the surface flux, this ratio is independent of distance and stellar radius, which is decreasing rapidly for the very late M stars.

Despite the 54 minute integration for the nonflare VB 10 spectrum, the 2 \(\sigma\) upper limits on the \(L_{\text{line}}/L_{\text{bol}}\) ratios are larger, typically by an order of magnitude, than the corresponding detected values for the companion star GI 752A. The large upper limits are due in part to the factor of 30 decrease in the square of the radius of VB 10 compared to that of GI 752A. If the value of \(L_{\text{CIv}}/L_{\text{bol}}\) for VB 10 were the same as for GI 752A, for example, then we would have to integrate for 40 hr to detect the C IV line in VB 10 considering only Poisson statistics in the line flux; but, in reality, we would have to integrate for a much longer time, since the noise in the background dominates the error budget. In order to speculate whether the nonflare plasma heating rates at transition-region temperatures change across the radiative/convective core boundary or as stars approach the red/brown dwarf boundary, we consider two indirect methods for inferring the nonflare \(L_{\text{line}}/L_{\text{bol}}\) Ratios.

First, we note that the Einstein HR1 value of \(L_{X}/L_{\text{bol}}\) for VB 10 listed in Table 4 is a factor of \(~1.8\) smaller than for the quiescent Prox Cen, and the upper limits in the nonflare VB 10 \(L_{\text{line}}/L_{\text{bol}}\) ratios are about a factor of 5 larger than the corresponding measured values for Prox Cen. Because the X-ray and transition-region line emission are observed to be related by a power law of the form \(L_{X} \propto L_{\text{CIv}}^{z} \) (Ayres, Marstad, & Linsky 1981), we estimate that the nonflare values for the VB 10 transition-region lines should lie a factor of 1.5 below the values for Prox Cen and thus a factor of 5 \(\times 1.5 = 7.5\) below the VB 10 upper limits in Table 4. This line of reasoning leads to the quiescent values of \(L_{\text{CIv}}/L_{\text{bol}}\) being a factor of 10/7.5 = 1.3 larger in VB 10 than in GI 752A. Since the value of \(L_{X}\) for VB 10 is uncertain and may include flares, this argument by itself does not carry much weight.

The flare on VB 10 provides data for a second way of estimating \(L_{\text{line}}/L_{\text{bol}}\) for VB 10 outside of flares. In Table 5, we compare flare peak C IV luminosities and total flare luminosities \(L_{\text{flare}}\) emitted by plasma hotter than 10^4 K for three late M stars, using the empirical relation between the C IV emission and the total radiative losses in the transition region and corona proposed by Doyle (1989) for M dwarfs. The C IV fluxes for the AD Leo flare observed with the GHRs spectra on 1991 May 9 refer to the flare peak emission, as is the case for the VB 10 flare, because the GHRs provides sufficient time resolution to measure the peak emission. On the other hand, the C IV fluxes measured from \(IUE\) spectra for the Prox Cen flare (Haisch et al. 1983) and the giant 1985 April 12 flare on AD Leo (Hawley & Pettersen 1991) refer to 60 minute and 15 minute time averages, respectively, which could be significantly smaller than the true flare peak fluxes. For this reason, we consider the \(IUE\) fluxes and the derived luminosities for these two flares to be lower limits to the flare peak values.

We take as our guide the 1991 May 9 flare on AD Leo, because, like the VB 10 flare, the peak value of \(f_{\text{CIv}}\) is measured and the flare is of short duration. Although the ratio of the peak C IV flux to the quiescent value, \(f_{\text{CIv}}/f_{\text{CIv}}\), must surely vary from flare to flare, the ratio of 90 observed in the flare on...
AD Leo may be representative of large flares. The data in Table 4 show that the ratio must exceed 40 for the VB 10 flare, since the observed C IV 1548 Å flux is 40 times larger during the flare than the nonflare upper limit. Assuming the value of 90 for the ratio, we estimate that the quiescent value for VB 10 is \( f_{\text{C IV}}^{\text{flare}} = 4.0 \times 10^{-16} \) ergs cm\(^{-2}\) s\(^{-1}\), and thus the quiescent \( L_{\text{C IV}}^{\text{flare}}/L_{\text{bol}} \) ratio is about two-thirds of the measured upper limit. This line of reasoning suggests that the quiescent \( L_{\text{C IV}}^{\text{flare}}/L_{\text{bol}} \) ratio is a factor of 7 larger for VB 10 than for GI 752.

Although falling short of proof, these two indirect but independent lines of evidence—scaling from the observed X-ray emission and scaling from a time-resolved flare on AD Leo—both indicate that the fraction of the stellar bolometric luminosity—that heats the transition region of VB 10 outside of obvious flares is comparable or larger than that in GI 752A. Because the two stars have the same age, we cannot explain this result as an age effect. Instead, our analysis suggests an increase in the magnetic heating rates across the radiative/convective core boundary and as stars approach the red/brown dwarf boundary, although the degree of this increase is uncertain. Another way of looking at this is that in order for the magnetic heating rates across the radiative/convective core boundary to decrease, the \( f_{\text{C IV}}^{\text{flare}}/f_{\text{C IV}} \) ratio must exceed 630 and the X-ray scaling law of Ayres et al. (1981) must be invalid for late M dwarfs. There is no evidence to support either of these arguments.

5. CONCLUSIONS

We have observed ultraviolet emission lines indicating plasma heated to \( 10^5 \) K during a flare on VB 10, the lowest mass star showing evidence for transient heating to these temperatures. The detection of this flare, together with the previous optical observation of transient heating of \( 10^4 \) K chromospheric material, shows that even the lowest mass stars at the end of the hydrogen-burning main sequence have strong but unstable magnetic fields, and that they must have some form of dynamo to replenish the annihilated surface magnetic fields. Although we obtain only upper limits for the VB 10 emission-line fluxes outside of the flare, two indirect lines of evidence allow us to estimate crudely what the line fluxes may be. These estimates suggest either constant or increasing magnetic heating rates as measured by \( L_{\text{line}}/L_{\text{bol}} \) ratios across the radiative/convective core boundary and as stars approach the red/brown dwarf boundary. The X-ray detection of VB 10 by the Einstein HRI is consistent with this conclusion, although flares could contribute significantly to this detection, but the ROSAT upper limit for VB 10 is only at the same \( L_{\text{X}}/L_{\text{bol}} \) level as GI 752A.

The nature of the nonradiative heating of the outer atmosphere of VB 10 appears to be characterized by a substantial transient component, which we attribute to flare activity. The dynamo theory and theories for the electrodynamic heating of stellar atmospheres must now account for both the occurrence of transient flarelke activity with efficient heating rates and the inferred increase in the steady quiescent heating rates compared to those of earlier M dwarfs of the same age and chemical composition. As it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from observations of only one system for a limited time, further Hubble observations are needed.

Because the standard \( \alpha-\omega \) type dynamo model apparently requires a radiative core to operate, we urge the development of detailed models for a magnetic dynamo that can operate in fully convective stars. This paper suggests that the dynamo may have to be capable of converting a larger fraction of the stellar bolometric luminosity into heat for plasma at \( 10^5 \) K than the standard \( \alpha-\omega \) type dynamo can in early M stars of the same age.

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**TABLE 4**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ion</th>
<th>( \lambda_{\text{max}} ) (Å)</th>
<th>GI 752A (M8 Ve)</th>
<th>VB 10 (flare)</th>
<th>Quiet Sun (G3 V)</th>
<th>AU Mic (dM5e)</th>
<th>Proxima Centauri (dM5e)</th>
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<tr>
<td>X-rays</td>
<td>4.80</td>
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<td>C iv</td>
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<td>-4.08</td>
<td>-5.46</td>
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<td>Si iv</td>
<td>1398</td>
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<td>&lt; -5.84</td>
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<td>O i</td>
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<td>&lt; -5.28</td>
<td>-7.66</td>
<td>-5.96</td>
<td>-6.75</td>
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**TABLE 5**

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<td>( \log L_{\text{bol}} ) (W)</td>
<td>30.22</td>
<td>30.78</td>
<td>32.00</td>
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<td>( f_{\text{C IV}} ) ( \times 10^{-14} )</td>
<td>3.56 * 10^{-14}</td>
<td>&gt;9 * 10^{-13}</td>
<td>2.0 * 10^{-11}</td>
<td>&gt;1.9 * 10^{-11}</td>
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<tr>
<td>( L_{\text{C IV}}/L_{\text{bol}} ) ( \times 10^{-4} )</td>
<td>1.4 * 10^{-4}</td>
<td>&gt;2 * 10^{-4}</td>
<td>5.7 * 10^{-4}</td>
<td>&gt;5 * 10^{-4}</td>
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<tr>
<td>( L_{\text{flare}}/L_{\text{bol}} ) ( \times 10^{-5} )</td>
<td>9.0 * 10^{-5}</td>
<td>&gt;3 * 10^{-5}</td>
<td>5.7 * 10^{-4}</td>
<td>&gt;5 * 10^{-4}</td>
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<td>( L_{\text{flare}}/L_{\text{bol}} ) ( \times 10^{-3} )</td>
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<td>( \Delta t ) (minutes)</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>260</td>
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<td>( f_{\text{C IV}}/f_{\text{C IV}} )</td>
<td>&gt;40</td>
<td>&gt;7</td>
<td>90</td>
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