



Keeping the DREAM Alive

*Dr. Jason Cuellar Helps
Emma Clair Stephens Stay in the Saddle*



At just eight years old, Emma Clair Stephens discovered her passion for horses. She began riding on a large quarter horse using an English saddle but enjoyed the style of Western pleasure in her home state of Texas.

Every rider dreams of finding the perfect mount, and for Emma, that journey began when her family acquired the granddaughter of Triple Crown winner Seattle Slew. She

started jumping low fences, but when the horse developed a bone spur, it had to be retrained for dressage. Emma adapted alongside her horse, marking the beginning of her record-setting career as a young rider. By the ages of 10 and 11, she was already making waves in competition. However, it was her dream horse, De Nouvelle Vi—affectionately known as Vivi—that truly launched her into more serious competition in the dressage scene.

Emma's journey took an unexpected turn after a serious fall. She began experiencing persistent back pain, whether in the saddle or conditioning on a treadmill. She initially managed the pain with non-surgical treatments, but it soon became clear that surgery was necessary if she wanted to continue riding and competing at the highest level.



Finding the right surgeon can be daunting for anyone, and for Emma, time was of the essence. Fortunately, she found Dr. Jason Cuellar, a Board-Certified Spine Surgeon who had recently relocated from Beverly Hills to Jupiter, Florida, with his young family.

“From the moment we walked into Dr. Cuellar’s office, we felt welcomed,” Emma recalls. “We had seen nine different doctors before meeting him. His entire staff was compassionate and understanding of my concerns. As a 20-year-old facing surgery, I was apprehensive, but Dr. Cuellar explained everything in a way that made sense to me.”

Dr. Cuellar diagnosed Emma with degenerative disc disease in the lower two discs of her spine—an uncommon condition for someone her age. While genetics may have played a role, the demands of competitive riding likely exacerbated the issue.

“Most surgeons would have recommended a two-level fusion,” Dr. Cuellar explains. “However, I believed the best approach was a hybrid procedure—an artificial disc replacement (ADR) at L4-5 and an anterior lumbar interbody fusion (ALIF) at L5-S1. This combination would provide the best long-term outcome, reducing the likelihood of additional surgeries within five to seven years. The hybrid procedure also allows Emma to return to full activity in her sport without long-term limitations, something I know is important to all equestrians.”

Now back in the saddle, Emma is recovering faster than expected. Both she and Dr. Cuellar are thrilled with her progress, placing her right in the heart of the Wellington young-rider dressage season. With her determination and expert care, she is well on her way to competing at the highest levels in the year ahead.

