Minimally Invasive Spine Surgery at UHealth/Jackson Enables Injured Orlando Gymnast to Return to Her Sport

Young Orlando gymnast Ella Chase was hoping to compete one day in the Summer Olympics when she suffered a painful spinal stress fracture early last year. But this spring, she is preparing to return to her favorite sport, thanks to a unique and complex minimally invasive procedure performed by Allan D. Levi, M.D., Ph.D., a spinal surgeon at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.

“One of the vertebrae in her spine had fractured and moved forward relative to the vertebrae below, a painful condition called spondylolysis,” said Dr. Levi, professor and chairman of the Department of Neurological Surgery at the Miller School, chief of neurosurgery at Jackson Memorial Hospital, and the Robert M. Buck Distinguished Chair in Neurological Surgery. “This type of lower lumbar spine fracture is typically seen in young patients like Ella, but fortunately few are severe enough to require surgery.”

Dr. Levi removed the damaged disk and inserted stabilizing devices to restore Ella's spinal strength while retaining flexibility.
Facing the daunting possibility of Ella, 14, having to leave gymnastics permanently, her parents, Paul and Jennifer Chase, searched online and learned about Dr. Levi’s expertise in treating athletes with pars fractures. An internationally sought-after spine surgeon, he has also developed new minimally invasive surgical techniques.

After evaluating Ella’s spinal images, Dr. Levi arranged an initial telehealth interview, and was able to schedule her surgery at Jackson Memorial last October.

To repair Ella’s damaged spine, Dr. Levi used small incisions in her abdomen to reach both the front and the back of the spine, remove the damaged disk, and insert stabilizing devices to restore spinal strength while retaining flexibility. “This was an unusual procedure, and we had an excellent outcome,” he said.

After her surgery, Ella remained in the pediatric intensive care unit at Holtz Children’s Hospital at Jackson Memorial Hospital and was discharged two days later.

A Lasting Love of Gymnastics

Ella started taking gymnastics classes at age 7, and immediately fell in love with the sport. She soon began practicing five hours a day, five days a week, aiming to become a high-level competitive gymnast. In March 2021, Ella was in the middle of her gymnastics season, getting ready for state competition, when she began feeling a pain in her back.

“Nothing I did was making it better, but I felt I had to push through the pain for the last month of our season,” Ella said. “I went to a doctor in Orlando who told me I had a stress fracture of my back, but there wasn’t anything he could do for
Through the years, Ella’s parents have been very supportive of their daughter’s gymnastic goals, including home schooling her to allow for more practice time. “We know how dedicated Ella is to her sport, so when conservative treatments here didn’t help, we began looking online,” Jennifer said. “We saw that this type of spinal fracture occurs in athletes, including dancers and gymnasts.”

Finding An Expert to Repair a Complex Fracture

Because Ella had a more complex fracture than usual, the Chases looked for an expert in spinal repair procedures. “We made it our mission to find the best doctor for Ella and feel blessed to have found one of the country’s top spinal surgeons in Dr. Levi,” Paul said.

With the help of her physical therapist, Ella is slowly returning to her gymnastics practice.

“I really appreciate all my parents have done to help me continue my sport, and hopefully compete at the collegiate level in a few years,” Ella added.

After a three-month recovery period, Ella is slowly returning to her gymnastics practice. “I am doing stretching, conditioning, and light impact exercises with my physical therapist,” she said. “It feels great to be back on the mat again.”
After evaluating Ella at the UHealth Spine and Brain Care Center in January and March, Dr. Levi saw that Ella’s recovery was right on track.

“This spring, she has been able to slowly return to gymnastics with the support of her family and physical therapist in Orlando,” Dr. Levi said. “If she does make it to the Olympics, I want to be in the crowd cheering her on.”