

Wilmot swimmers bring home nine medals for Canada from Special Olympics | NewHamburgIndependent.ca

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Scott Cressman, Independent staff

Erica Buehlow, Alex Buehlow, and Michael Heath will be stepping off a plane from Athens, Greece this week with heavier luggage than when they left.

The swimmers found some precious medals on their trip, winning seven golds and two silvers for Canada at the Special Olympics last week.

The Special Olympics comes only once every four years, so this was a rare opportunity on the world stage with 7,500 athletes from 185 nations. These young swimmers made the most of it.

On the first day of competition, Erica earned Canada's first gold medal of the competition in the 800 metre freestyle. She followed that performance with more top finishes in the 400 metre freestyle, 200 metre breaststroke.

Alex took gold in the 200 metre individual medley and silver in both the 1,500 and 400 metre freestyle races.

Heath joined the medal frenzy with two more Canadian golds in the 50 metre butterfly and freestyle races.

Erica's girls relay team struck gold again for her fourth first-place medal.

Heath and the Buehlows are members of Wilmot's Aquatic Aces swim club and earned a spot in Greece by winning regional, provincial, then national competitions that started four years ago.

The three swimmers medaled in every race they entered except one, the boys relay which was disqualified in the finals after another team member could not compete.

The swimmers' coach, Joni Sanders, credits the trio's strong work ethic for their success. They practice six to nine times a week, and hardly ever miss a session in the pool.

"I think it's because they all work so hard and they very rarely miss any practices. They commit to it," Sanders said.

"I was hoping they'd swim really well and do well, but you never know what the rest of the competition is like."

She credited their families for also working hard and encouraging the swimmers to reach the elite level.

Although the gold medalists get home this week, their season is far from over, Sanders said. Michael Heath will continue swimming this summer at the Pan Pacific Para-swimming Championships in Edmonton this August. Alex will swim at Canadian nationals in Montreal at the end of this month.

The three have been in Greece since June 17 and, despite their success there, are ready to see their families again, said Sanders: "They're excited about it but they're also glad to be coming home."