

Will Cole is an ambassador for the Star City Half Marathon in the truest, deepest sense of the word. He loves it. He lives it. Cole is practically an evangelist for running events, serving as an ambassador for the Salem Half Marathon and the Blue Ridge Marathon, as well as three brands associated with the sport.

“I say I’m an ambassador for the Blue Ridge Triple Crown,” Cole said.

This time of year, with the Star City Half just days away, he’s all about promoting this race. He wears the shirts, posts on social media, promotes the race as an adjunct marketer. People who recognize that ambassadors have discount codes ask for his to save 20 percent on the entry fee.

“I’ve probably brought 30 to 40 people to the race,” he said. “I’m like a running billboard. I have the swag and the shirt that says I’m an ambassador.”

Cole puts between 20 and 40 miles a week into training – depending on when the next event is scheduled – so he’s a common sight on the Roanoke River Greenway and surrounding streets.

Not bad considering his time in the sports has been brief. In March 2019 he decided to start running. Eight months later, he finished his first race, which happened to be the Star City Half Marathon. This year’s event will be his tenth half marathon. He has run in the Triple Crown events as well as races in North Carolina and the Peachtree Road Race, a 10k with more than 50,000 runners dashing through Atlanta.

The 29-year-old married father of two (soon to be three) took up running for two commendable reasons. He wanted to honor his late father and set a positive example for his children.

Bob Cole died in 2009 from health complications associated with the toxic residue inhaled over the years as a professional firefighter. Prior to the health issues, Bob was a runner who competed in the New York City Marathon, among other races.

To honor him Will set a goal of also running the NYC marathon. He also intends to run the Marine Corp Marathon. Come spring, he will run his first full marathon right here in Roanoke, taking on the Blue Ridge Marathon.

“I figure I’ll just tackle the country’s toughest marathon right out of the chute,” Will said with a laugh.

As much as Will looked up to his father for his dedication to distance running, he’s hoping to offer the same example to his children.

“They can look to me to set an example of dedication and hard work,” Cole said. “It’s a healthy lifestyle. I’ll be out there three or four times a week. I hope they can see the benefits.”

For Cole, those benefits definitely out-weigh the costs, which is a strange thing to say when one of those benefits is a 50 pound weight loss to date. The costs are less obvious – or they were.

“I thought running was going to be inexpensive. I was wrong,” he said. “You pay a lot for a shirt, a medal and a banana. We joke that those are the very expensive bananas.”

Entry fees, travel and lodging, not to mention the cost of shoes, all add up to a costly pursuit. But for the generation before him and the generation after, it's all worth it to Cole.

If you want to know how much he loves running, just ask. He's not hard to find. And ask for those discount codes, too.