

When the runners in the Star City Half-Marathon and 10k take off at the starting gun on Nov. 23, they will be cheered on by more than just friends, family, and onlookers. Actual uniformed cheerleaders will be on the course offering encouragement and boosting morale for the race participants.

Every young lady in her William Fleming High School uniform will be cheering for every runner.

The cheerleaders will be at the beginning of the race, stationed around the course, and at the end as the final push to the finish line.

“We cheer on each runner,” said William Fleming cheer coach Taren McCoy. “We will stay there until the last one finishes. Our goal is to propel those runners, to motivate them, and cheer for them doing their best.”

This will be the fifth year the cheerleaders have come to the event to provide vocal support, even when it is tough to get out there. The cheerleaders were on the racecourse early last year, despite returning home from a playoff football game several hours away in the wee hours of Saturday morning,

“We want to make sure all runners feel appreciated. We disperse along the course. A majority of the team members are at the beginning. They are divided up by age and are out there in different sections of the course. Because the course is set so the start and finish are the same place, the same ladies that cheer them at the start are the ones who cheer them to the finish line.”

Surveys returned by runners in the race say they are happy to have the encouragement of the young women on the course.

For McCoy, cheering on the runners at the half marathon and 10k put on by Virginia Amateur Sports is about more than just encouraging those racing on a particular November day. The positive push of the young women is a service to the community of runners however, one of many communities served by her squad.

“We want to be active in the community,” McCoy said. “We want to be positive and give them a feeling of helping. We love doing that.”

Since taking over as cheer coach at Roanoke’s William Fleming High School 14 years ago, McCoy has implemented a requirement that all the members of the team perform community service hours.

“The number of hours depends on their grade level. The higher they are, the more is expected,” she said.

What qualifies as service can be up to the young women themselves.

“I have some missions I want them to participate in, but they get to tailor the programs to what they want, too,” McCoy said.

The young ladies work in service programs in their churches, school, the Boys & Girls Club, and outreach to other schools. They are working with middle school cheer teams while modeling the service programs.

“One year he had a girl who knew an elderly neighbor who needed a fence painter, so we painted a fence,” McCoy said.

October is especially big for the squad as they have a special message during Breast Cancer Awareness Month. The young women go, as a team, to the homes of family members who are battling breast cancer to cheer, encourage, and lift up with positivity the

woman in her battle. For those who have battled the disease and come out on top, the team cheers are a form of congratulations.

“We cheer them on in their battle or we cheer for them for their success,” McCoy said. Being an uplifting part of the Roanoke community has been a characteristic that stays with the team members after their graduation from William Fleming.

We have our middle school coaches who are all alums, following our philosophy,” she said. “One of our former cheerleaders is over community engagement in the city [of Roanoke]. The footprints we are putting down, they are definitely taking to adulthood.