

A race is a dynamic event with much more happening than the dash to be the first to break the finish line tape. The vast majority of participants are not even attempting to win the race. Participation is enough. Finishing the course is an accomplishment. Supporting, registering, starting and interacting with other participants are all parts of the whole experience that make races special for the hundreds of people who take to the pavement on race day.

The Star City Half Marathon and 10k are happening on Saturday, Nov. 20, along the Roanoke River Greenway. Virginia Amateur Sports, a longtime benefactor of organization and volunteerism for the Star City Striders, has taken the reins of race control.

For Roanoke County resident Ashley Watkins, the race is not about crossing the finish line in front of others – it's about enjoying the time on the course.

"Even living here all my life, I saw things I didn't realize were downtown," she said.

Ashley loved it so much that when she saw a post from Virginia Amateur Sports seeking ambassadors for the event, she applied.

"I fell in love with races several years ago," Ashley wrote on her application. "I finished the Star City 10k in 2019. The post race food was excellent and I love seeing so much of the city on the course.

"My dad passed away suddenly in June after fighting cancer for two years. Even though all the races I had signed up for went virtual I still found they gave me something positive to focus on and I completed my first [Virginia's Blue Ridge] Triple Crown."

In the volunteer role as an ambassador, Ashley promotes the races and encourages people to register. She's a social media marketer working to build up the event she loves so much.

Because social interactions are still limited and caution is still urged in certain environments, Ashley said her efforts have been primarily online. In the future she plans to do more leg work with fliers, signs and old-fashioned conversation as ways to get the word out that the Star City Half Marathon and 10k are back.

An enthusiast of 5k and 10k events, Ashley takes part in plenty. She jumped at the chance to be an ambassador and help the Star City races.

"I found a couple friends and we walked it. Walked all through downtown Roanoke," she said. "I loved it."

Walked? Yes, she walked it. The races are competitions for some, but for many they are events meant to be enjoyed with little regard to competition.

"I'd like to run it someday but I'm not there yet," Ashley said.

Nothing wrong with that. The Virginia Amateur Sports mission is to promote fitness and healthy lifestyles. Competition is a means to that end. In keeping with those goals, participants such as Ashley and her walking companions are valued participants.

Come Nov. 20 you'll find her on the greenway once again. The start and finish line will be adjacent to the soccer fields at Rivers Edge Sports Complex and the race will be along the Roanoke River Greenway, heading east to a turnaround at the halfway mark.

The street course required certified personnel to man several intersections, but there is a severe shortage of such personnel this year.

A notice on the race page of the VAS web site says a new course is being charted for Roanoke and should be in place in 2022, when the personnel shortage is expected to be resolved.

When Ashley took part in the 10k race in 2019 she was so enthralled with the course that she couldn't wait to be part of the next one.

We all know what happened in 2020, but the race was held in the style of the time – virtually. So Ashley went out last year and walked 6.2 miles on the greenway. At the time, the course was still, officially, on the streets of Roanoke. The virtual event meant the course wouldn't be closed and participants could select their own course. For out-of-towners, this was a necessity.

The virtual option is still available for participants who don't feel comfortable coming to the event, but most of the people will be back out there, in person, remembering the exhilaration of running or walking on a course, with others, for the personal benefits that are so much greater than a finishing time or place in age group.