

# Florida lawyer relishes each opportunity to better himself and his work



By Brian Cox

Whether it's taking a master class or reading a personal development book, attorney Blake Cole has made a regular habit of looking for ways to improve, innovate, and broaden his horizons.

"I've learned that it's important to adapt and that being set in your ways is not a good thing," says Cole. "I always try to listen to people and get suggestions."

A shareholder at Saalfield Shad, P.A. in Jacksonville, Fla., Cole has turned his interest in innovation to identifying processes that streamline work and leverage technology. He recently spent a year working with developers to customize a new file management system for his practice.



Attorney Blake Cole and his wife of 15 years, Vicky, on a recent trip to Greece.

Born and raised in Jacksonville, where his family has lived for several generations, Cole grew up watching his father practice law as an insurance defense attorney. Known statewide for his handling of major litigation cases, Bob Cole also was active with the American Board of Trial Advocates and a leader with numerous community organizations, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northeast Florida and Jacksonville University. He is now a certified mediator.

"I idolized my dad," says Cole, who even got to see his father try a medical malpractice case on Court TV once. "It was apparent everywhere we went that people in the community looked up to him and respected him."

It is from his father that Cole believes he inherited his fierce competitive streak. He thrives on fields of contest and does not shy away from challenges or confrontation. Growing up, he played multiple sports, including baseball and soccer. In high school, however, he was a four-year wrestler and swimmer, eventually becoming captain of both teams.

Football was a huge passion, and his family and friends bonded over the Florida State Seminoles.

"We cared a lot about football," he recalls. "We traveled for games, and we made a big deal out of every game."

Careers in law run wider in the family than just Cole and his dad. His Uncle Frank is a lawyer who also operates a charter fishing boat in Jacksonville. And Cole's younger brother, Brett, is an associate at Saalfield Shad with an office next door to Cole's. Brett pursued a law degree after being a middle school history and civics teacher for several years and joined the firm in 2022.

The brothers and their families gather for dinner at their parents' home most Sunday nights.

When Cole was 18, mere weeks before he was to leave to start college in Tallahassee, Florida, his older brother, Brian, was tragically killed in a hit-and-run accident at the age of 20. It was a devastating loss for the close-knit family and the trauma threw their lives into a tailspin. Cole considered changing his college plans and staying home.

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“It was a rough time,” he says. “There was a lot of just surviving and pretending that went on for years.”

Cole had thought from an early age that he would become a lawyer like his father, but early in his college career he toyed briefly with the idea of studying psychology. It didn’t stick, however, and he soon switched his major to American and Florida Studies with the thought of going to law school.

He graduated from J.D. Florida Coastal School of Law in 2009. While in law school, Cole clerked for Paul Harden, a sole practitioner who was a lobbyist and a well-known land-use lawyer. Working three days a week during law school and full-time over summers, Cole had the opportunity to do “a little bit of everything.” The hands-on experience proved invaluable.

After graduating and passing the bar, Cole stayed on with Harden for almost a year before joining Cole, Scott & Kissane, a large civil litigation firm (of no relation) that boasts having the most defense attorneys in the state.

Coming from a two-person practice, Cole says the big firm’s intense and demanding environment was initially a bit of culture shock, but he soon found that it aligned with his competitive nature, and he excelled.

He was immediately thrust into trial work and tried his first case as second chair with a senior partner within months of starting at the firm. Less than a year later, he tried his first case.

“I learned a lot about how to be a lawyer and how to be a good insurance defense lawyer,” he says. “My favorite thing about being a lawyer is that I do like the pressure. I like winning. I like the ‘you versus me’ – I thrive on it.”

He also enjoys the intellectual challenge of deposing or examining expert witnesses. He has deposed a litany of expert witnesses in a range of fields, particularly in medicine, but also in life care planning, vocational rehabilitation, plastic surgery for burns, eye injuries, and more.

“There’s no end to the little specialties you have to get into and what’s fun about it is the challenge to gear yourself up to go toe-to-toe with someone who is an expert, and you have to know enough to be dangerous,” he says. “That can be taxing, but it’s really fun.”

At Cole, Scott & Kissane, Cole pushed himself to “beat everybody” and to bill more hours than all the other associates. He gained a tremendous amount of trial experience and a reputation for being a workhorse.

“It was comfortable for me because I’m a glutton for punishment,” he jokes. “It was all I knew.”

Ultimately, though, the work demands left little time to spend with his family. He and his wife, Vicky, are high school sweethearts who have been married for 15 years. They have four children: Norah, 14, who is in the eighth grade; Bobby, 11, a sixth grader named after Cole’s older brother; fourth-grader Lincoln, 9; and

Margot, 7, who is in the second grade.

After nine years at the firm, Cole found he was missing out on a lot at home. He looked back and marveled at his father’s ability to manage a demanding legal practice and yet make every one of Cole’s wrestling matches. His dad also found time to be president of the Little League and to be a coach. He found a way to be around and involved.

“Doing the kind of law that we do is challenging,” says Cole. “I think my dad didn’t really show us any of that.”

So, in 2022 when Saalfield Shad contacted him looking for a partner with his extensive trial experience, it was perfect timing.

“It was an economic opportunity, a leadership opportunity, and a work-life balance opportunity,” says Cole, who was also ready for a new challenge.

Saalfield Shad was founded in 1989 and has grown into one of northeast Florida’s preeminent insurance defense and civil litigation law firms. With deep local ties, the firm represents private companies, individuals, self-insured entities, and insurance companies throughout northern and central Florida, including the Panhandle, as well as Georgia.

As the youngest shareholder in the firm, Cole embraces the role of “rainmaker.”



**The Coles celebrate Easter with their children – (l-r) Margot, Lincoln, Bobby, and Norah.**

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“I like being the person the clients come to. I like helping lawyers learn. I like helping cases progress along to success,” he says.

He has worked to expand the practice and to build upon existing clients and now oversees six lawyers in his department, which brings its own challenges.

“For older generations like the lawyers who trained me, it was their way or the highway and there was really not a lot of flexibility and that fit with me because of how I was raised,” says Cole. “I’m fairly certain that is no longer a workable model in some respects. Technology and innovation change things. Generations change. People are different. They’re expectations and desires are different.”

Adapting to the changing environment is critical for continued success, he says. He no longer thinks about wins and losses the same way he used to. Instead, he now concentrates on doing what he considers to be “the most excellent work a lawyer can do for a client,” which is to focus on collecting and analyzing all the necessary information to keep his clients informed so that there are no surprises, and he can help them forecast the outcome, whether it’s good or bad.

“I care tremendously about doing good work,” says Cole. “I’m always trying to better myself.”



**The Cole children on their first day of school: Norah, 14, is starting eighth grade; Bobby, 11, is starting sixth grade; Lincoln, 9, is starting fourth grade; and Margot, 7, is starting second grade.**