

T&FN INTERVIEW

John McDonnell

by Jon Hendershott

After John McDonnell's Arkansas team won the '93 NCAA Indoor crown, its 18th college title among indoor and outdoor track and cross country, the Irish-born coach became the winningest coach in NCAA history—in any sport.

But the juggernaut headed by McDonnell just kept rolling. With its '06 Indoor title, McDonnell's Hog squads have now claimed an astounding 42 team victories. No less dominant at the conference level, UA recently won its 22nd SEC outdoor title (see p. 24) and 79th overall.

The Arkansas power has always been built around star distance runners, plus solid field events—especially in the horizontal jumps—and more recently has returned to sprint talents like Wallace Spearmon and Tyson Gay.

Through the years, McDonnell has maintained a sure hand on the Arkansas helm with a blend of expert coaching, a sense of family, plus humility coupled with humor. We spoke with the Irish native, now 67, shortly after his latest SEC win:

T&FN: It was a bit of a surprise to see you quoted after your latest SEC team title—No. 22 in outdoor track—that it was your most satisfying win. Even after all the NCAA titles?

McDonnell: Well, I also said that it was the most satisfying win—after the first NCAA title. It was important that we win with the SEC meet in the new track stadium [McDonnell Field].

McDonnell On Building A Winning Program

John McDonnell's molding of strong teams has centered on distance power backed up by field-event strength.

"I kind of patterned myself after coaches like [Villanova's] Jumbo Elliott and [Oregon's] Bill Bowerman, who always had good field people to go along with their distance runners," he says. "Bob Timmons at Kansas had good distance runners and great throwers."

Which athletes helped get the Arkansas train rolling?

"Niall O'Shaughnessy was the first great miler we had," he says. "In the field events, not only was Mike Conley a great athlete in general, but he also was a great team guy. Joe Falcon was very easy to coach. Alistair Cragg had as good a mind as any athlete I've been around. You could tell him a certain thing, like lead a guy as good as Nick Willis in a 3K and run his legs off. It takes a very special athlete to be able to do that, but Alistair wouldn't be afraid to do it."

We've won so many titles and now have the new track and we're going to lose? Let's not let that happen. So that's what made it very gratifying.

T&FN: But that '84 NCAA Indoor title is your most memorable win overall?

McDonnell: Oh, absolutely. I waited a long time for that one. [laughs] The number of years might not have been that long, but we had been 2nd and 3rd about four times in cross

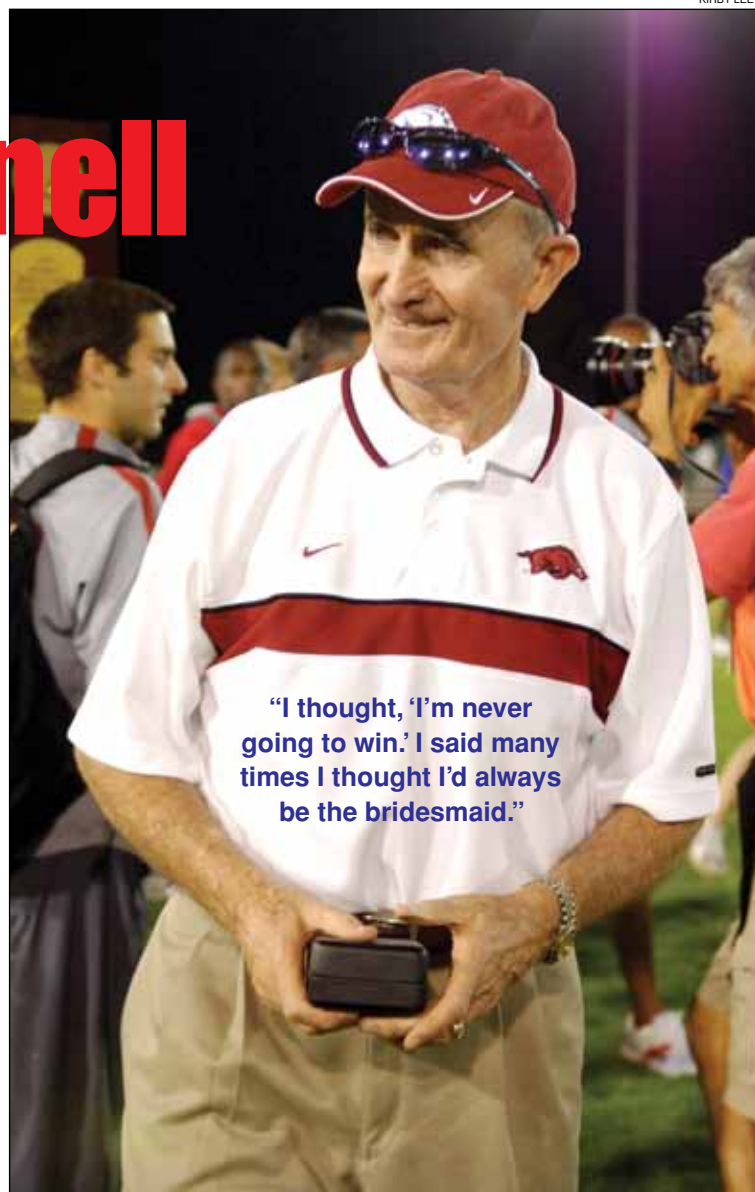
country and indoor track. I thought, "I'm never going to win." I said many times I thought I'd always be the bridesmaid.

T&FN: You attended Southwestern Louisiana—now Louisiana-Lafayette. How did a guy from County Mayo on the west coast of Ireland end up in Cajun country?

McDonnell: I knew an English distance runner, Malcolm Robinson, who went there. I got started running in Ireland when my younger brother asked me to pace him in an 800. He didn't catch me and I decided I liked this running thing. I moved up to longer distances and eventually qualified for the '60 Olympics in the 5000. But Ireland sent only one guy to Rome because of money.

T&FN: What drew you to coaching?

McDonnell: When I was at USL, Bob Cole was the only coach. Robinson and I were older and we made up the workouts. Bob said, "You know about the distances." Malcolm left and I was on my own and I still made up our



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workouts. And everybody started running good. [laughs] I decided, "There's another sideline I can have."

T&FN: Speaking of sidelines, there is the story you were once a TV cameraman?

McDonnell: I was for a year, at WOR-TV in New York. The studio where I worked was near where [comedian] Soupy Sales did his show. The same family that owned the station owned the New York Mets at that time, so we covered Mets games. They weren't good then.

T&FN: So how did you end up at Arkansas?

McDonnell: Both Oklahoma and Arkansas wanted a cross country coach to start in the fall of '72. Oklahoma had a distance coach, so I came over to Arkansas. Ed Renfrow was the head coach, but he was on his own. He didn't have any assistants but told me if I came there I could have the cross country team. Boy, I liked that idea.

Plus, northwest Arkansas really impressed me with all the hills and all the different trails. Having been a runner myself, I thought it would be a great place for distance running. So he gave me that job and I also worked at a



McDonnell doesn't really come with an NCAA team trophy attached to his hand; it just seems that way

KIRBY LEE

local high school. I'd work with the distance guys in the afternoon. I did that for five years and then became the head coach of the whole track program in '78.

After just my second year, we started winning and we never lost it until we left the SWC for the SEC [in '92]. I also felt if you got good field event people with good distance runners, you could score a lot of points. So I hired Dick Booth and, as the saying goes, the rest is history.

T&FN: *You handle the distances, the field events are Dick's, the sprints are Lance Brauman's. So each coach has his own area?*

McDonnell: I'll make suggestions at times but I firmly believe that if you hire someone to do something, let them do it. When I coach distances, I like to do it my way. I'm out there every day holding the watch. If a coach is successful at what he does, let him do it. I've always been fortunate to have good coaches.

And I'm an advocate of the belief that if there's a good athlete out there, sign him. If there are three good triple jumpers, let's have all three. Whatever event they're in, good athletes win.

T&FN: *What are the qualities you look for in an athlete you'd like to come to Arkansas?*

McDonnell: I especially like to hear an athlete talking about his career continuing beyond college. Also to have his former coach say he's very talented and just needs guidance and competition. Also that he's a great team man, but who also cares about other kids.

I really don't care so much about the team as long as kids care for one another. They become better athletes when they develop a closeness. When an athlete like Josphat Boit says he can do three events at Conference, he takes pride in that. When you have that atmosphere around your team, that rubs off on younger kids coming up to try to do what he did.

T&FN: *Can the veterans be kind of surrogate coaches, being role models to show the way for the younger kids?*

McDonnell: They sure can. If someone steps out of line off the track, in his social life, the older guys can say, "That's not the way it's done." Very quickly I'll get to know what's going on through the upperclassmen. They have paid the price and they expect younger guys to do the same.

It's more than just coming to Arkansas and

isn't going to get hurt. Guys who take short cuts and don't build a base—they might be talented and have a great mind but they still push their body further than it's ready to handle, then they get hurt.

T&FN: *[Miler] Frank O'Mara once said, "Application and effort are two things John McDonnell requires." Is that still the case?*

McDonnell: Absolutely. And any good program has this, but it's hard work done intelligently. By that I mean, when do you apply it? A lot of kids run hard and run fast, but a lot don't know when they're going to do it. That has to be on the big occasion.

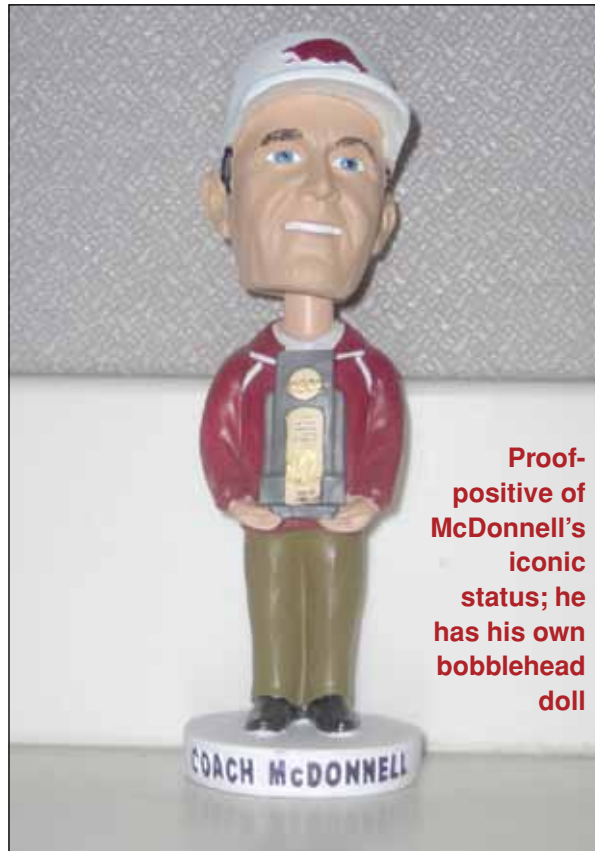
T&FN: *As the head man, do you yourself ever feel pressure to keep winning those title plaques?*

McDonnell: Not any more. I did back from about '84 when we started winning until almost 2000. I went 15 years in a row there where I was relentless; constantly working and working. I look back at that and when I got sick and I wonder if I did the right thing. I had some stress-induced heart problems and had a stent put in. I ran myself pretty hard. I didn't have high blood pressure or high cholesterol; it was just from stress.

T&FN: *You once admitted that you used to pressure athletes. But are the expectations now kind of just understood?*

McDonnell: I know that other schools have told recruits there is a lot of pressure at Arkansas.

But for the last several years, I've told kids up front, "I'm not going to put any pressure on you. But if you want to win, there is pressure—at all levels. And if you're going to the next level after college, like the



Proof-positive of McDonnell's iconic status; he has his own bobblehead doll

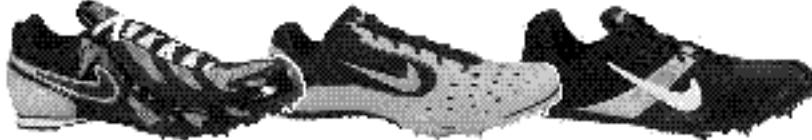
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Trials and the Olympic team, that's pressure. You might as well get used to it. If you can't handle it now, you won't handle it later."

T&FN: In the state of Arkansas, with no pro teams, the school is the athletic show. Has that been a plus for you and the program?

McDonnell: I think it has. And I've been fortunate having Frank Broyles as athletic director. He became AD the year I took over as head coach. He made me head coach.

Frank wanted to have a total program; he had been a very successful football coach so he was going to be a successful AD. So I was lucky in that respect too. I think any school that's in a

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state with many pro teams, there is too much of a demand for spectators.

T&FN: What is the relationship of Tyson Foods and the track program? It has been a huge backer of sports at Arkansas.

McDonnell: Way back, I got them as a sponsor at a home meet, buying the watches; support on a small scale. It wasn't until I talked in the mid-'80s with Don Tyson about an indoor track that they really got interested. I told him that we had won many national championships, but not a single one in the state of Arkansas. And we never would until we got an indoor track.

That was the thing that hit home with Don. He said, "I'd like to see you win a title here." So they gave \$3 million for the indoor facility. Tyson also sponsors the invitational indoor meet and now is even a national sponsor for USATF. We never would have had the indoor track if not for Tyson.

T&FN: You've won many honors—NCAA coach of the year 27 times, on the '03 World Champs staff, now in the U.S. Hall of Fame. . .

McDonnell: I was there with Wes Santee, who I have known for a long time and have great respect for. And athletes like Mike Powell and Roger Kingdom. I thought, "What am I doing here with those guys?" But of course, I'm very glad I was.

T&FN: But for you personally is there any honor greater than adding to your collection of NCAA championship plaques?

McDonnell: Well, one great thing that happened—which wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been successful at Arkansas—is when we got to visit the White House in '93 after we broke the record for winning NCAA titles. I had known President Clinton when he was governor of Arkansas. But for me, that was a tremendous honor, the biggest.

But, yes, the NCAA titles still are very important. We are remodeling our hall of fame in the basketball arena and we want to get all 42 of our championship plaques together in one trophy case. "The gold case," I guess. Nothing but gold. □