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 never thought I’d always be the bridesmaid.

**T&FN:** Speaking of sidelines, is there 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: 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 having a trophy attached to his hand; it just seems that way.

T&FN: Can you summarize your approach and philosophy of coaching the distances?

McDonnell: I’m a firm believer in building a tremendous base, to try to prevent injuries. If you can prevent injuries and the athlete has the ability, then he’s going to be successful.

Injury is the ruination of a lot of good athletes. If you get the base work done, so the athlete is in good physical condition before he really starts training seriously, there’s a 99% percent chance he 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 where there 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. In my mind I was always healthy. 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
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.