

Irish Cultural Society of Arkansas

**FOR ADDITIONAL
INFORMATION**
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

University of Arkansas Coach John McDonnell Named Grand Marshal of the 10th Annual 2009 Rock to North Little Rock St. Patrick's Day Parade

LITTLE ROCK, AR (March 4, 2009) John McDonnell has been named Grand Marshal of the 10th Annual 2009 Rock to North Little Rock St. Patrick's Day Parade. McDonnell, track coach for the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville from 1972 to 2008, was named Grand Marshal by the Irish Cultural Society of Arkansas (ICSA), the organization presenting the Parade, "for his many years serving student athletes of Arkansas," said Tim Ryan, president of the Society.

"I was surprised to hear the news," said McDonnell. "I knew Little Rock had a parade, but to be named Grand Marshal is a special present."

McDonnell is originally from County Mayo, Ireland, and is the second youngest of eight children. He was raised on a dairy farm and came to the United States on a track scholarship when he was 23 years old. He initially lived and worked in New York as a television cameraman. McDonnell earned his bachelor's degree from Southwestern Louisiana (now Louisiana-Lafayette) in 1969. While competing, McDonnell was a six-time all-American, the 1966-67 AAU 3,000-meter champion, and the mile champion at the 1966 British Selection Games. He was hired as the cross country coach in 1972 and added the entire men's track and field program in 1978.

Coach McDonnell led the track team to their first national championship at the 1984 NCAA Indoor Championships while the school was a member of the now-defunct Southwest Conference. Since then, the University of Arkansas has won 40 NCAA championships, including 11 cross country, 19 indoor track and 10 outdoor track. Other schools have won only 24 combined NCAA titles in the three sports during the same period.

McDonnell's 40 NCAA Championships are more than any coach in any single-gender program in the history of collegiate athletics. McDonnell also won five national triple crowns (in 1984-85, 1991-92, 1992-93, 1994-95 and 1998-99).

When asked about his greatest accomplishment, McDonnell said "Winning the first conference and first national titles. The first track title set the stage for the dynasty."

McDonnell is married to Ellen Elias of Bayonne, New Jersey and they have two children, Heather (age 30 who lives in Austin, Tx.) and Sean (age 24 who lives in

Fayetteville). He was granted United States citizenship in 1969. Since retiring, McDonnell enjoys spending time on his 2,500 acre cattle ranch in Pryor, Oklahoma.

“America is such a melting pot,” said McDonnell. “There are so many people from different parts of the world and many nationalities are trying to keep their heritage alive.” When asked what he would like the people of Arkansas to know about him and his Irish heritage, McDonnell states proudly, “I’m a true Irishman, born and raised.”

The Irish Cultural Society of Arkansas is a not-for-profit, public service organization founded in 1996 to educate Arkansans in aspects of the culture and history of Ireland. The Society provides Irish food and objects of Irish art for folk festivals and fairs, provides concerts of Irish music and dance, and participates in community service programs and events – all in an effort to reconnect Arkansans with their Irish heritage.

The 2009 Rock to North Little Rock St. Patrick’s Day Parade will be held on Saturday, March 14, 2009 at 1 p.m. The Parade will start on World Avenue, just east of I-30 near the Clinton Presidential Center and Heifer International. The Parade will travel through River Market in downtown Little Rock, crossing over the Main Street Bridge, through the Argenta Historic District, ending at 6th and Main in North Little Rock.

Headlining the St. Patrick’s Day Parade this year will be the Sylvan Hills High School Marching Band, the Lyons College Pipe Band from Batesville, Ar., and the Red Rivers Pipes and Drums from Shreveport, La. The Parade will also feature Irish music and dancing, Irish Wolfhounds, the River Rail Trolley, clowns, floats, antique cars and much more.

Following the Parade from 2:00 to 4 p.m. will be a “Dancing at the Crossroads” event in the Argenta Historic District near Cregeen’s Irish Pub at the corner of Main and Broadway in North Little Rock. The event will feature Irish dance performances from the McCafferty School of Irish Dance and the O’Donovan School of Irish Dance, and many musical performances including Shamrock Strings, singer/songwriter Peg Roach Loyd, the Arkansas Celtic Music Society session musicians and many others. Admission to the event is free.

ICSA was originally founded by a group of Irish nationals, many of whom had immigrated to Arkansas during the nursing shortage of the 1980’s. Recruited by area hospitals, nurses from Ireland and Great Britain came to Arkansas originally intending to work here a few years and return to their homeland. Instead they married and settled in Little Rock and began to raise families. As their children grew, they realized the importance of passing on their Irish culture and heritage to their American-born children. Together with their Irish-American friends, they formed the Irish Cultural Society of Arkansas with the following goals:

- To develop and further enhance local interest in the culture of Ireland and its people.
- To publicize the presence of an active Irish community in the Little Rock area.
- To reacquaint Arkansans of Irish descent with their culture and ethnic history.
- To familiarize the general public with the culture of the Irish people and the richness of their contribution to America.

The group has about 80 members who share a love for and interest in Ireland.

For more information about the 10th Annual 2009 Rock to North Little Rock St. Patrick's Day Parade, Dancing at the Crossroads or the Irish Cultural Society of Arkansas, contact Tim Ryan at 501-868-6416 or visit www.LRIrishParade.com.

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