The AFC North is a harsh mistress; after all, it's not known as the NFL's Group of Death for nothing.

(OK, maybe we're the only one that calls it that. But it should be known as such).

And that's a lesson that Browns CEO Joe Banner learned during the fall and one that he needs to remember as the Browns get ready for the official opening of free agency on Tuesday.

The NFL has done a great job of promoting the annual Scouting Combine to the point that fans walk around for days afterward talking about 40 times, loose hips and tight ankles.

That long weekend in Indianapolis also gets fans and the media so jazzed up that many are already working on mock drafts (sometimes multiple ones) projecting which players will be selected by which teams when the NFL Draft kicks off on April 25.

It is such an exciting time that some seemingly forget one important step, which is that no one knows who the Browns will need to draft until after we see what they do in free agency.

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- If they want to spend in free agency the money is available.
- There are several players on the market that just happen to play the positions the Browns most need to fill.
- Many of those players just so happen to currently play in the AFC North, which can benefit the Browns in two ways.

The Browns need more pass rushers to help out in defensive coordinator Ray Horton's aggressive defense, more linebackers and help in the secondary.

The Browns have been linked to several players, most notably defensive end Cliff Avril from Detroit, linebackers Paul Kruger and Dannell Ellerbe from Baltimore, and cornerback Keenan Lewis from Pittsburgh.

We were a little cool about Avril at first, despite the fact that he has 20.5 sacks over the past two seasons, as he has been a 4-3 end in Detroit and the Browns may have to pay him around $11 million a year. There's also this from Pro Football Focus :

"Despite shaky run defense and a propensity for committing penalties, Avril's enticing sack total earned him the franchise tag in 2012. However, a below average PRP and -9.9 grade against the run ranked him 55th out of 62 fellow 4-3 defensive ends. Nevertheless, he still managed 10 sacks, so expect some team to drastically overpay for him as early as next week."

But Avril can get to passer and it he sounds open to playing as a stand-up rusher – a position he filled in college at Purdue.

"I think I can do it. I thought I was going to be a 3-4 coming out (of college), obviously," he told mlive.com
. "I ended up getting drafted to the Lions at the defensive end position. The weird thing is all the guys out of Purdue from the last few drafts who played end became 3-4 ends. I'm the only one out of all of those guys who played linebacker and became a defensive end. Maybe I'll join that club, if it's the case."

So the position switch may not be as much of an issue because, while the Browns will be running a 3-4 under Horton, it's not a traditional 3-4, which means Avril could be playing with his hand on the ground quite a bit. (Although if the Browns can't stop the run, there may not be as many opportunities to pressure the quarterback as we would like).

We also like the fact that, even though the Lions play their home games in a dome, Avril has been exposed to playing in the elements in Green Bay and Chicago, something that would come in handy in the AFC North.

While we've warmed up to Avril, we've cooled down on Kruger, who hit everyone's radar after posting 4.5 sacks during the playoffs.

It's hard to know, however, if Kruger is a player who finally performed when given a chance or someone who is the beneficiary of the talent around him.

Baltimore played the first six games of the season without outside linebacker Terrell Suggs and, during that time, Kruger only totaled 1.5 sacks. It wasn't until Suggs came back to the lineup – and took the attention of opposing offenses – that Kruger was able to put up decent numbers.

Even then, Kruger still couldn't bring consistent pressure, as he had three or fewer quarterback pressures in half of Baltimore's games in 2012.

While Kruger's sack numbers in the playoffs look good, he was shutdown by Denver and New England after opening the playoffs with 2.5 sacks against the Colts.

Just think, if Denver safety Rahim Moore had batted down that pass at the end of regulation, would anyone be talking about giving big money to Kruger? (And with Kruger set to follow Joe Flacco in cashing a big check in free agency, has there ever been one player that made so much money for his opponents than Moore?)

If the Browns really want to go after a Baltimore linebacker, Ellerbe may be the better choice.

Ellerbe earned a cumulative grade of +11.5 from Pro Football Focus after moving into the starting lineup for the Ravens and is solid against the run, missing just one tackle out of 47 attempts against the run. He is also an efficient pass rusher, totaling five sacks, four hits and nine hurries in 79 snaps as a pass rusher, according to PFF.

The Browns are going to have to do something to protect inside linebacker D'Qwell Jackson, who struggles when he has to take on guards. One way could be to pair Jackson with another linebacker that the offensive line has to worry about.

While the Ravens would probably like to keep both Kruger and Ellerbe, it appears that Ellerbe would be their choice if they could only have one of them, which is another reason why the Browns should go after Ellerbe.

That brings us to Lewis, who like Kruger and Ellerbe moved into the starting lineup for the first time in 2012.

Lewis had 69 tackles and 23 pass breakups last season, and opposing quarterbacks had a rating of just 80.7 on passes thrown into his coverage. While some will focus on the fact that he did not have an interception, he seems to know how to cover a receiver, and with the Browns planning to put an emphasis on pressuring the quarterback, the team is going to need defensive backs that possess that skill.

One thing to worry about with Lewis is that cornerbacks who have played for Pittsburgh defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau haven't exactly lit the world on fire once they have left his system .

Like Ellerbe, Lewis is a player that his current team wants to retain, which makes him the type of free agent the Browns should want.

The biggest advantage that targeting players like Kruger, Ellerbe and Lewis is that the Browns would be signing player who know what it means (and what it takes) to play in the AFC North, which is something that we've always thought was underappreciated when it comes to selecting players.

Take, for example, the case of Peyton Manning (we know part of this is a stretch, but it helps illustrate our point).

It's extremely unlikely that Manning would have come to the Browns as a free agent last season, no matter how much money they would have offered him. But even if the Browns were closer to being a better team than they currently are, it's doubtful that Manning would have seriously considered them, in part because of the level of competition they face from within the division.

If you are Manning, do you want to have to face the Ravens and Steelers twice a year, or would you rather go to Denver, knowing that an 8-8 record will be enough to get you into the playoffs in one of the weakest divisions in the NFL?

It takes a special type of player to be successful in this division; it's not for everyone. Targeting players that you know can perform in the pressure cooker is a strategy that should be part of the decision-making process for the Browns. After all, that's been a successful strategy for the Ravens and Steelers for the past decade.

The Browns are not going to sign all of these players, but let's say they sign Avril and Ellerbe, or Avril and Lewis, and then add one or two second-tier free agents (Julian Edelman anyone?) and not only have they made huge strides in rebuilding the defense, they will have taken some important pieces away from their main division rivals.

And they still have (at least) two picks in the first three rounds of the draft where they should be able to add two more impact players.

The opportunities are there for the Browns, how they decide to approach them is up to the

team.

Whatever happens, we’re sure things are going to get even more interesting starting on Tuesday at 4 p.m.

(Photo by U.S. Presswire)