The considered word on the street is that the Cleveland Browns will be "aggressive" when free agency opens for real late Tuesday afternoon.

Well, thanks as usual to the working class journalists who brought you that pithy bit of analysis. Left undefined though is what does it mean to be "aggressive" and it is that very definition that will be the difference between whether this team continues to occupy the 8th circle of Hell for another decade or finally graduates to a few lesser levels on its march toward real honest-to-goodness mediocrity.

The facts, such as they are, are straightforward. The Browns are waaaaaaaaaaay under the salary cap, so much so in fact that it makes you wonder whether someone in the previous regime simply didn't own a calculator. By luck or design, though, this gives the Browns what the working class journalists like to call "flexibility." The Browns also do have plenty of roster openings or, as the working journalists like to call it, "needs." They also have a new owner flush with new money from a lucrative sponsorship deal and an abiding need to impress. Mix this together and of course it must mean that the Browns will be "aggressive."

But if we're being honest here, and as always we must, then being "aggressive" is the last thing that this team needs to be at the moment for "aggressive" in this context carries negative connotations not positive ones. Teams that are "aggressive" tend to overspend because they overvalue. Far better, I think, for the Browns to defy the working class journalists. I'd settle for "prudent" and be thrilled if they got to "smart." As it stands on the eve of free agency, I'm encouraged the Browns will be at least one and maybe both but will reserve celebrating because if fans in Cleveland know anything it's that celebrating prematurely is our Achilles heel. (See Byner, Earnest. See Ehlo, Craig)

What this free agency season really will be is a test of what kind of club president Joe Banner and what kind of general manager Mike Lombardi are going to be. The early indication is that

Banner, at least, will serve in the role of heartless bastard who will cut popular but overvalued veterans irrespective of what they've brought the franchise. For what it's worth, in football at least that's a good thing. If you want proof look at James Harrison in Pittsburgh and Anquan Boldin in Baltimore (though the Ravens haven't yet cut Boldin, they simply asked him to take a 1/3 pay cut as his reward for leading them to the Super Bowl.)

Free agents tend to fall into 3 specific categories: players completing their rookie contracts; players completing their post-rookie contracts; and players looking for their last contracts. The latter are easily identified as those are your aging veterans angling for one final payday. In that group goes the Browns own Phil Dawson and Josh Cribbs. The Steelers Harrison is of the same ilk as well.

Generally speaking, these players are like that carton of milk in your refrigerator with the expiration date closing in. They may not yet be spoiled but be forewarned, taking a drink might be fine but it might also get you a seat on the porcelain throne for the next several hours, too. Teams taking these players do so either because they are desperate to look "aggressive" to a fan base that's lost faith or because they think that overpaying for one or two is a calculated gamble that if it plays out will put them on the precipice of a Super Bowl. For every one or so that works out there are 4 or 5 that don't. The odds aren't great.

If the Browns jump into free agency quickly and announce a signing at 4:02 p.m. on Tuesday it will mean two things. First, they were violating league rules by finalizing deals before the opening bell. But it's the Browns so I doubt no one will much care. Second, and more importantly, they will have overvalued and overpaid because they thought some other team would try to steal from them. It may look "aggressive" but it will end up poorly.

Teams that go fishing like this, particularly by paying any of the big guaranteed dollars and oddly long contracts that temporarily spread that money over several years are usually desperate teams trying to change their fans' perception of them. If Banner and Lombardi opt for this approach then you can pretty much write off Banner and Lombardi has saviors. There almost is no way to make these kind of free agents work within a team like the Browns without causing even bigger headaches down the road.

Personally I'd like to see the Browns re-sign Dawson but I'm not going to bemoan the loss if they don't. Dawson is by any measure on the back end of an excellent career. That means he's expensive. But kickers on the back end tend to develop consistency problems. David Akers is

Exhibit A. Dawson may be good for another season, but anything more than a year by year contract for a kicker his age is just asking for a dead money problem in year 3 of that contract. The surest way of losing that vaunted "flexibility" is by loading a team's balance sheet with dead money for players long since out of the league.

Cribbs is similarly situation, a good career that's winding down. Yet Cribbs' history doesn't suggest he's expensive. Cribbs may ultimately get what looks like a long-term deal with another team but only as a means to spread the cap hit. What's more likely is a contract more backloaded than front in order to ease the inevitable cap hit that will come when he's not invited by his new team to finish out his contract.

Cribbs simply doesn't fit into the Browns going forward unless it is an extremely club friendly contract. That means smallish guaranteed money and backloaded larger salaries that have no cap impact when he's cut in another year or two. Anything else would be a signal that Banner and Lombardi aren't spending Jimmy Haslam's money wisely.

It's not just the aging veterans that can get a team in trouble, either. I'm worried that the Browns will be overbidding and hence overpaying free agents in either of the other two categories because they are desperate to look "aggressive."

Far better for the Browns to run up the price on some other teams for players they don't really want and then use their discovered "flexibility" by being volume value players. It's not like they have one or two slots to fill anyway. This team needs bodies.
What free agency has really taught us is that the only way to find value players is in the same way that the New England Patriots have been finding value players for years. That means taking your time, letting the desperate and the stupid spend themselves silly while the value market develops, which it always does. The Patriots don't tend to ever make a large headline in free agency and that's something to be emulated not avoided.

The lesson in buying real estate, particularly your house, is the same lesson to be applied in free agency. Don't fall in love, with a house or a player. There are always others on the market that will fill your needs and usually at a much better price.

The Browns' so-called push into a higher level of analytics suggests that as a franchise they are

tired of falling in love and overpaying only to find a leaky basement in a year or two. That's why it would be a surprise to me if the Browns were day one players in free agency. That's when all the worst deals tend to get made. But then again I'm usually surprised by what the Browns do and like that aforesaid leak in the basement, the surprises usually are of the wrong kind.