All year long I get emails from transplanted Clevelanders who talk about how they miss living on the north coast. Haven't been many of those emails these last couple weeks though. It is COLD. Gary Benz is back to check in with some Lingering Items once again, this week hitting on the Browns GM search, the Indians off-season expenditures, and the impact Anderson Varejao has had on the Cavs so far this season.

The Only Thing Missing is Ryan Seacrest: It wasn't the record breaking cold snap this morning that sent the shivers down my spine.

It was the news that Cleveland Browns' owner Randy Lerner seems to be going about his search for a new general manager the way "American Idol" goes about finding the next Carrie Underwood:

fly around the country auditioning a bunch of wannabes and give them a yellow ticket back to Cleveland for a closer look.

I have nothing against any of the candidates Lerner has interviewed thus far. Inde ed, I am four-square with Mike Sundquist, recently fired as the general manager of the Denver Broncos, that the Browns present an intriguing opportunity.

By the way, Sundquist isn't an actual candidate yet.

He's sitting by his phone somewhere in a Denver suburb waiting for it to ring.

So is William Hung.

The real intrigue in the Browns' opportunity is its unique mix or professional challenges and outright insanity. Not only is there much actual work to do, but the real perk is that if you show any modicum of competence, you'll be immediately rewarded with a reworked and extended contract for millions more and then be paid off on its full value when it turns out a season later that the modicum of

competence was just an illusion. Lerner does have a pattern.

But most intriguing of all, perhaps, is the emergence of Lerner as something more than the mostly absentee owner he's been to date. To those who question the wisdom of his bass-ackwards search of a general manager, Lerner said that it didn't much matter because both the general manager and the coach would be reporting to him anyway.

That's a significantly different reporting structure for Lerner and signals that, if nothing else, he's ready to put himself in a much more active role with the day-to-day operations of the team he claims to cherish so much.

The fact that Lerner let Scott Pioli, who, on paper, looks to be the most qualified to take over the Browns' football operations, get away also confirms the point. There were early indications that Lerner was turned off by Pioli's supposed outrageous demands and that's why an agreement never came to pass.

Lerner dispelled that notion.

But this is simply a matter of degree.

Given the deal Pioli struck with Kansas City, it's obvious that Pioli wanted not only a say in hiring the new head coach, but also have that head coach report to him.

View these "demands" as outrageous if you will, but the fact that Lerner was not willing to make the same commitments to Pioli that Kansas City was tells me that Lerner may actually have realized that his hands-off approach, while welcomed by megalomaniacs like Phil Savage, was actually counterproductive to the franchise. That's not a suggestion that he meddle a la Art Modell. The last thing the Browns need is another high dollar, low value wide receiver to bust the cap.

Maybe They'll Ask for Bailout Funds, Too: The early word is that the Cleveland Indians will have a payroll in the $83 million range for the 2009 season.

If that holds, then the Indians will actually have increased their payroll by around $5 million from 2008 and given the general economic malaise that has impacted every other team not located in New York that's not to be taken lightly.

The $5 million question is whether it was money well spent. There's a lot of excitement over Kerry Wood, for example, but he's still a pitcher with a history of arm troubles and a slim resume when it comes to closing.

Wherever else you might come out on this issue, just know that if he fails it is going to create a huge hole that is going to be difficult to fill, Jensen Lewis notwithstanding.

It also could end up being the catalyst to the Indians engaging in another midseason salary dump as well.

A team like Cleveland living on the economic fault line needs attendance to make its financial structure work.

A slow start exacerbated by injuries to or ineffectiveness by key players with big salaries (see, Hafner, Travis) will be met with far less tolerance in the Indians' front office this season then it would otherwise have in better economic times.

Fishing for Diamonds: Much of the e-mail I get about the Indians falls into the category of complaining about the fact that the team spends most of the off-season bottom feeding. I understand the angst and share it as well. But in truth unless the Dolans are willing to deficit spend out of their own pocket, that's all this team is ever going to do.

In baseball terms, Cleveland is a small market with small market economics.

Blame it on the spineless owners who kowtow to the union every time there is a mention of a salary cap.

Shopping on the Island of Misfit Toys is never going to be satisfying for any fan. But that's what the Indians and a whole bunch of other teams have been reduced to in order to field a team each season that has even a fleeting chance of competing.

While it can make for interesting baseball at times, mostly it's just frustrating.

Major league baseball is a league of haves vs. have nots. The haves, like the Yankees and the Red Sox, mostly try to outspend each other in an insane arms race of sorts with the same goal of mutual destruction.

The have nots keep trying to find diamonds in the dust the haves leave behind.

Every once in awhile, one of the little engines that could, like last year's Tampa Bay Rays, is able to achieve a sense of harmonic convergence.

It rarely lasts.

The lack of complete revenue sharing is at the root of the problem and as a result teams like the Yankees simply have access to more local money than teams like the Indians. They have a bigger media market and a larger base from which to draw fans.

The Indians are hardly alone in trying to find treasure out of someone else's trash.

The impacts of a struggling economy are always uneven and while no team is immune some are better positioned than others to survive it.

But in major league baseball, the problems this creates are far more pronounced than in any other sport because of the lack of revenue sharing.

Where the pain is shared more evenly in the NFL and the NBA, the gulf between the haves and have nots just gets more pronounced in major league baseball.

Look at it this way, when was the last time any team in the NBA or NFL

complained of being located in a small market?

Milwaukee Brewers' owner Mark Attanasio said recently that it may be time for baseball to revisit the idea of a salary cap. But if there's anything that is clear about the owners in baseball is that they take positions reluctantly and move on them slowly. The odds that there will be a salary cap within the next 10 years are roughly the same as their being a legitimate playoff in major college football.

Just Think If He Could Really Shoot: Having hit on the Browns and the Indians, I'd be remiss if I didn't give at least some acknowledgement to Cleveland's best professional sports team, the Cavaliers.
Some have labeled this season as "charmed."

The reality is that this is simply a talented team with depth.

While LeBron James' leadership and defensive play have rightly gotten most of the attention thus far, it would be difficult to overstate the impact Anderson Varejao has made this season. Last season, Varejao got a late start due to a silly contract dispute and then reported out of shape.
He didn't really get moving or lose the paunch until the season was mostly over.

This season, though, Varejao is living up to his contract, justifying in large measure the demands of his agent that were based more on speculation than results. Because he's in far better shape, Varejao seems in far better control of his game than in years past. His "Wild Thing" persona now reflects more accurately his hair style than a somewhat manic, driving on two-wheels-on-the-side-of-a-cliff style of play of previous seasons.

As a result Varejao is on track to better virtually every one of his career statistics. Averaging about the same amount of minutes per game as he did a year ago, he's shooting nearly 10% better from the field than last season and averaging a career

high 9.3 points per game.

Similarly, his turnovers are down from last season and his blocks are up, although only slightly.

More importantly, he's become a very credible fill-in for the injured Zydrunas Ilgauskas and is giving general manager Danny Ferry pause to think that a contract extension, once unthinkable, is now more likely.

A Question to Ponder: Browns fans already know that one of the two teams they loathe the most, either the Pittsburgh Steelers or the Baltimore Ravens, will be in this year's Super Bowl. But is that worse than the thought of the Arizona Cardinals finally making the Super Bowl?