As the NFL gets into high gear during its free agency period, an iceberg lies directly in its path. The tip of that iceberg is this season's lack of salary cap. Lying just below the surface are far bigger, more fundamental labor problems.

Teams believing they can easily navigate around the lack of salary cap risk getting capsized by the what may come in the form of a new labor contract that eventually gets negotiated. Will there be a new salary cap imposed? Likely. Will that cap require them to make major changes based on the moves they made during the uncapped year? Perhaps.

The bigger unknown, though, is whether or not there will be an all out war with the NFL players association. It's been years since the last which means it's probably about time.

But remain calm. All is well. There's hope on the horizon because David Modell has just the solution. He thinks the NFL should make him the czar of a special committee to deal with the problem according to an item in the Wall Street Journal.

David Modell. Why does that name sound familiar? Oh yea, he's the idiot stepson of disgraced former Cleveland Browns owner Art Modell. In part the story of Modell's leaving Cleveland was his underlying motivation to preserve the franchise for his son to take over.

That of course didn't work out so well. Even in the waning days of his existence in Cleveland, Art was turning over more and more responsibilities to David as a way of preparing him for his eventual coronation. On more than one occasion Art commented what a great owner David would be someday.

It was just another one of Art's great fibs, the kind of wild overstatement that only he could make. Most everyone would let Art get away with this kind of outrageousness because, well, that was just Art being Art.

For David, someday never came of course. When he arrived in Baltimore he did so with a beautiful wife and several kids. A short time later that wife left him and took the kids back to Cleveland because of an intriguing personal scandal involving David and a Ravens cheerleader. None of that deterred Art from installing David as president of the Ravens.

Maybe everything that followed is just one of life's little coincidences but even after the sweetheart deal of all sweetheart deals that the city of Baltimore and the state of Maryland gave Art to get him to relocate the Browns' franchise, Art and David went about squandering the cash anyway. As a result the NFL imposed a deadline on Art to find an additional investor or risk having the NFL sell the franchise for him.

That's where Steve Bisciotti came in. He rescued Art by infusing the franchise with cash and taking a partial ownership interest with the option to buy out the rest. After Bisciotti exercised the option one of the first things he did was tell David that his services as club president would no longer be needed. Hard to see that one coming.

Since then David has more or less been living off the riches that Bisciotti gave him while engaging in all sorts of vanity projects for himself and his "visual artist" new wife that don't have a snowball's chance of succeeding. What does continue to succeed, however, is David's

unique brand of hubris and cluelessness.

Based solely on his professional credentials I can't think of anyone more ill-equipped to deal with a business problem of any sort than David Modell. In fact, in the history of the entire world there may not be any one less qualified than David Modell. I wouldn't trust him to run a paper route let alone solve a complicated labor issue for the NFL.

Fortunately, the NFL surely feels the same way. I'm sure they'll receive David's suggestion with all the enthusiasm it deserves. Then they'll pat him on the head and send him back to the children's table to play with his toys and leave the hard work, once again, for the grown ups.

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When Browns' president Mike Holmgren and general manager Tom Heckert sent Derek Anderson packing this past week, it was the most visible sign that they are reworking the roster in ways that head coach Eric Mangini couldn't even imagine let alone execute.

The more subtle signs came in the form of the release of Hank Fraley and Rex Hadnot and the signings of linebacker Scott Fujita and lineman Tony Pashos. Somewhere in the middle of those extremes is the Browns' signing on Thursday night of tight end Ben Watson to a 3-year contract worth $12 million, a little more than half of which is guaranteed. By my count that

makes Watson the 5th tight end on the current roster.

The signing of Watson probably meant the quick end for Steve Heiden and may mean a similar fate for Robert Royal, a tight end signed by Eric Mangini last season. Royal's signing was necessitated after Mangini traded Kellen Winslow.

Royal, to a certain extent, was really a poor man's Watson, a pass catching tight end whose stats don't quite match Watson's to this point. Royal's 2009 season was mostly injury plagued and unproductive, a metaphor really for the rest of the team as well. Watson, meanwhile, caught 29 passes last season for a New England Patriots team in transition.

Assuming Watson stays healthy, an assumption no one should dare make when it comes to the Browns, he's an upgrade to the position, which is like saying that Charmin is an upgrade from generic toilet paper.

As with every free agent signing, there's always something to fret about. In this case it's simply the fact that the Patriots let Watson leave without having a viable starter at the moment to replace him. That either means that the Patriots see themselves de-emphasizing the tight end in their offense and/or they feel they can get similar production at a cheaper rate. Given how Bill Belichick operates, it's likely the latter which means that perhaps the Browns overpaid for Watson. But as a bottom-feeding team, the only way the Browns are going to attract better players here initially is by overpaying them.

If Royal and Heiden are indeed gone, there are still 3 other tight ends to complement Watson: Evan Moore, Greg Estandia and Michael Gaines. The Browns don't need to keep 4 tight ends certainly, so sorting out who else is gone will be an intriguing little process.

Of the remaining 3, Gaines is the elder statesman with but 5 years of experience. Both Gaines and Estandia are more known as blockers than receivers so one of them likely will stay. My guess would be Estandia, although Gaines demonstrated in limited duty that he can catch the ball as well. Moore, on the other hand, had an interesting season. After spending most of it on the practice squad, he was promoted to the regular roster in early December. All he did after that was come in and catch virtually everything thrown his way, leading most to wonder why he had spent so much time on the practice roster even as Royal was proving to be mostly a bust.

Of all the Browns' free agent signings thus far, Watson looks to make the biggest impact. And with the back ups on the roster, that along with left tackle and kick returner means there are at least three positions settled going into 2010. Only 19 or so more to go.

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During a recent New York Yankees exhibition game, former Indians pitcher CC Sabathia was rocked hard. It happens. What was interesting, though, was his quote afterward. I'll quote it exactly as written in the USA Today: "Terrible. Location was bad. Collapsing on the backside. Still struggling with my delivery. I guess it's going to take awhile. Just try to get better."

Nothing particularly revealing in the quote itself except the stilted rhythm of the language that Sabathia used. It's almost as if he's now taken to speaking as if he's leaving a post on Twitter. Economy of words. Economy of insight. Welcome to the new world order.

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Outlook Columbus, an alternative publication targeting the gay and lesbian community in Columbus, had a recent interview with Ohio State head coach Jim Tressel. Nothing Tressel said was in the least controversial. A few sportswriters gave Tressel credit for his willingness not to discriminate against media outlets.

It all should have ended right there except that Geoff Decker of The Big Lead found it necessary to use this as convenient excuse to oddly criticize Tressel but not for anything he did or said but because of something he may be thinking but hasn't articulated.

Decker surmises that Tressel is religious and conservative and thus, like Tony Dungy, probably feels the same way about same-sex marriage as Dungy. Dungy, as you may recall, publicly came out against it a few years ago.

It would all be so laughable if Decker wasn't so serious. He says that while it may be unfair to put words in Tressel's mouth, "it's hard not to deduce that Tressel, a known religious conservative, likely shares some form of these views. At the root of these views is the belief homosexuality is a choice and it is something that can be 'treated.'" Decker then amazingly concludes that while he really doesn't know if Tressel feels this way there was nothing he said in the interview with *Outlook Columbus* that suggests he doesn't. Of course, there was nothing in the interview that suggested he does, either, but that inconvenient fact didn't further Decker's narrative.

I'd chalk it up to simple irresponsibility and leave it at that, but the fact that he wanted to further his cause, the rights of openly gay athletes, at the expense of Tressel is simply unfair and actually diminished the far more important point he was trying to make about those rights in the first place. But then again that's what happens when you have children playing adult games.

I understand that there are those outside the Ohio State bubble that don't much care for Tressel. Most of it is simple jealousy couched in the cynical belief that no one can be that decent of a human being. But Tressel isn't the bad guy here. It's the people with small minds on all sides of the equation.

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The item about CC Sabathia leads to this week's question to ponder: Why does the NFL call them "preseason games" and Major League Baseball calls them "exhibition games?" And a bonus question: Does it have anything to do with the prices charged for admission?