With Ben Wallace and Zydrunas Ilgauskas at 34 and 33 years of age respectively, Erik Cassano says that the Cavaliers' big man situation is like a house of cards. As long as everything stays perfectly positioned and there are no disturbances, it looks pretty good. But as soon as there is a gust of wind, the whole thing might come tumbling down. Erik talks about the Cavaliers frontcourt situation in his latest piece for us.

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Predictably, it is less than a week into the Cavs' preseason, and the breeze is beginning to blow. On WTAM's Sportsline program Thursday night, Plain Dealer Cavs beat reporter Brian Windhorst told host Kevin Keane that Ben Wallace's back is already starting to act up.

Wallace, 34, and Zydrunas Ilgauskas, 33, have backs in the condition that you'd likely expect for two extremely tall men who have spent over a decade pounding up and down hardwood floors eight months a year. That is to say, the kind of backs that make physical therapists wake up in a cold sweat.

Every veteran NBA team has big men battling back issues, just like every Major League Baseball team has pitchers with arm injuries. It just comes with the territory. Abuse a certain part of your body for a couple of decades, and it will develop chronic problems.

But the Cavs' problem extends beyond the spinal column. They don't have a

whole heck of a lot on the bench to pick up the slack if Ilgauskas or Wallace miss extended time.

It's realistic to think that Wallace could miss 20 to 30 games this year nursing assorted injuries. In addition to his back, he has a chronically-bad shoulder and it's not a stretch to assume that his knees and ankles ache more with each passing season.

Z played the final portion of last season with a ruptured disk in his back. Luckily, he doesn't have to jump at 7'-3" so his back doesn't have to endure the pogo-stick pounding of some bigs, Wallace included. But it's hard to imagine Z staying on the floor for 82 games. I'd put his over-under on games missed at 10, maybe even as high as 15.

That means the guys who are supposed to provide most of the Cavs' rebounding and interior defense could miss 40 or 45 games between the two of them, just trying to recover from nagging injuries. Which increases the probability that Z and Wallace will miss concurrent games on more than one occasion. So the contingency plan of Mike Brown and Danny Ferry had better include other guys who can play starters' minutes and produce.

Their insurance policy right now consists of Anderson Varejao, J.J. Hickson, Lorenzen Wright and maybe Darnell Jackson -- unless he gets shipped off to the developmental league.

Hickson and Jackson are rookies. Even though Hickson has looked promising in a microscopically-small playing sample, it's unrealistic to think he can step in and provide a starting lineup bandage if Wallace and Ilgauskas are riding the pine. Varejao has started a few games in prior years and could probably perform adequately as a short-term solution. But, lest we forget, he tends to rack up fouls at a prodigious pace. That will probably only increase if the NBA cracks down on charging flops.

Some people have called Wright this year's Scot Pollard. I think he's more like this year's Jay Guidinger.

So in a nutshell, the only reliable backup big man the Cavs currently have is Varejao, and he could end up on the bench in foul trouble four minutes into the game. So if you're looking for stabilizing depth, don't look to the Cavs' backup

bigs.

The other option -- the option Brown is reportedly trying to pursue in training camp -- is to shuffle guys to other positions. If Ilgauskas and Wallace end up in sick bay together for a stretch of games, it would be possible to start Varejao at center and LeBron James at power forward, moving Sasha Pavlovic to LeBron's small forward spot and rounding out the backcourt with Mo Williams and Wally Szczerbiak or Delonte West.

The problem with that approach is it would probably neutralize LeBron's superlative athleticism to a degree. It would force LeBron to move closer to the basket, particularly at the defensive end, to guard guys bigger than him and focus on rebounding. He'd take more of a beating in the low-post mosh pit, and instead of running the floor in transition, he'd likely be the guy making the outlet pass.

LeBron is fast enough that he could snatch a rebound, outlet the ball to Williams or West and still sprint up the floor fast enough to finish at the other end. But I'd rather have LeBron be the first guy up the floor on a fast break. If there is nobody between LeBron and the hoop when he gets the ball, there won't be anybody between him and the hoop when he crushes the dunk. Whether in a half court set or in transition, LeBron is at his most dangerous when he can get a head of steam going toward the basket. That was the whole point of Ferry trading for a point guard like Williams.

Playing LeBron at the four-spot could probably work in smaller doses, when the other team tries to put a smaller lineup on the floor, but it seems like Brown shouldn't want that setup for 48 minutes a night.

Any way Brown tries to mask it, the Achilles' heel of the Cavs' roster is going to be exposed at some point: They have two aging, injury-prone starting big men and no real safety net on the roster.

The situation might force Ferry to make a move sooner rather than later. I'm not in the camp that is itching to trade Szczerbiak and his more than $13 million expiring contract as soon as possible. But that, and the possible trade exception that could be awarded the Cavs when and if Eric Snow's retirement becomes official, are the biggest trade bullets Ferry might be able to fire this season.

It's looking more and more that if Ferry is going to move Szczerbiak's contract, it's

going to have to be for a big man who can start. But the names that could be on the trading block (Zach Randolph, Eddy Curry and Udonis Haslem, to name a few) don't exactly pop off the page and scream "missing piece to a championship." Randolph is probably the best option from a points and rebounds standpoint. But his attitude problems have been well-documented over the years.

It's never good when your team's GM gets his hand forced into making a deal by circumstances. So far, the two biggest trades Ferry has orchestrated -- February's Wallace-West-Szczerbiak blockbuster and August's Mo Williams deal -- were the products of patience and waiting for the right pieces to align.

But if Wallace and/or Ilgauskas start to pile up missed games with assorted injuries, Ferry might have to become a maintenance man, plugging large holes on a team with NBA championship aspirations.

It's not an ideal situation, but Ferry knows what is at stake. This team is talented enough and motivated enough to win an NBA title this season. But not without healthy, productive big men. One way or another, with or without the cooperation of Wallace's and Ilgauskas' deteriorating body parts, Ferry is going to have to make that happen.