If you've followed the Cavaliers for any or all of the past 13 years, it has been easy to develop an emotional attachment to Zydrunas Ilgauskas. After foot problems had most of us convinced his career would be a short one, Ilgauskas recently became the most tenured Cavalier in team history. But the past six seasons have also seen Z age from smooth moves and a silky jumper to a just-plain-slow spot-up jump shooter. Will Z and his expiring contract be used at the trade deadline to add a piece to this year's Cavs team? Erik Cassano gives us his thoughts.

If you've followed the Cavaliers for any or all of the past 13 years, it has been easy to develop an emotional attachment to Zydrunas Ilgauskas.

Between 1996 and 2001, he missed two full seasons, and all but five games of a third season, recovering from repeated bone breaks in his feet. The frustration for Z, the Cavs and Cleveland fans was compounded by the fact that his talent was undeniable. In his delayed rookie season of 1997-98, he averaged 13.9 points, 8.8 rebounds and 1.6 blocks per game, and was named to the NBA's All-Rookie First Team.

But the foot problems just wouldn't go away. Faced with the possibility of crippling himself by continuing to play basketball, he seriously considered retirement. He decided to make one last go of it with an extensive restructuring of his left foot -- which accounted for five of his seven foot fractures -- that was aimed at taking stress off the navicular bone, in the midfoot, which kept failing.

The 2000 surgery led to another year of painful rehabilitation, and a tenuous-at-best grip on his career. When Z took the floor during the 2001-02 season, no one really knew what to expect. He played in 62 games, starting 23.

His 11 points per game was gravy. The big victory was his presence on the court.

If Z could have finished out his playing days as a serviceable backup, it would have been considered a minor miracle by anyone who watched his five-year battle with brittle feet. But Z was only getting started. As the 2002-03 season progressed, it became apparent that the restructuring surgery had been a rousing success. He averaged 17.2 points per game, still a career high, and -- most importantly -- played in 81 of a possible 82 games. The only game he missed that year was due to a technical-foul suspension.

But the Cavs won just 17 games that year. The 2003 draft was the type that changes franchises, and the Cavs wanted a piece of the action. More specifically, the Akron high school phenom, LeBron James.

When the ping-pong balls of the NBA draft lottery handed the first pick to the Cavs, LeBron's future as a Cav was sealed, and Z was suddenly an important supporting cast member of the Cavs' resurgence.

The ensuing six seasons have brought Cleveland the spoils of LeBron: The franchise's first NBA Finals berth in 2007 and a 66-win season a year ago. But the past six seasons have also seen Z age from smooth moves and a silky jumper to a just-plain-slow spot-up jump shooter.

The game has changed. Now 34, Z has aged as gracefully as one could expect, given the amount of metal in his feet, but the center spot has been taken over by an assortment of freakishly good athletes.

When Z entered the league, the center spot was the sole property of muscle men and back-to-the-basket players. Shaquille O'Neal was the gold standard -- huge and pumped, but never to be mistaken for a high wire act. The other dominant centers of the time included Hakeem Olajuwon, Alonzo Mourning, David Robinson and Dikembe Mutombo. All great in their own ways, but without question fitting the old-school mold of a center.

Then Kevin Garnett and Tim Duncan came of age, and the era of the power forward-center hybrid arrived. The wing-scorer play of Amare Stoudemire upped the ante on what a center could and could not do. Then in 2004, Dwight Howard arrived. The strength of a center, the athleticism of a forward, and a tremendous leaper to boot.

By the time Howard and the Magic got through with dispatching the Cavs in last spring's Eastern Conference Finals, it was apparent to those inside and outside the organization that if the Cavs wanted to win the four playoff series necessary to claim the NBA title, Z just wasn't going to cut it as the starting center anymore.

So Danny Ferry traded for Shaq. Even at 37 and slowing down, Shaq still brings a dimension of size, power and defense to the pivot that Z could never hope to bring.

The net result: When Shaq is healthy, Z now comes off the bench. In the closing years of his career, with seasons' worth of aches and pains taking their toll, it has been a difficult adjustment for the Lithuanian big guy.

Coming into games from the bench means coming into games cold. The muscles that you worked so hard to limber in pregame warmups start to contract. The post touches and perimeter shots you were used to getting at the outset of every game are no longer there. For Z, who was used to filling a certain role for so long, coming off the bench is more than a mentality shift. It's a shift in his state of being. So far, his game hasn't reacted well.

Through Friday's loss at Charlotte, Z had started six of a potential 16 games. His minutes per game are down about three from last year (24.3 from 27.2). While his minutes per game have fallen off somewhat, his points and rebounds per game are way off. He's averaging 7.1 PPG after having never averaged fewer than 11 PPG in any previous season. His 6.2 RPG is on pace to become his lowest per-game rebound total since he averaged 5.4 RPG in 2001-02 while returning from his reconstructive foot surgery.

However, the biggest red alert comes from his shooting percentage. Z is a career 47.5 percent field goal shooter. His 15-to-18 foot jumper has set standards for reliability that car companies can only hope to match. But this year, it's just not there. Through Friday, he was shooting 37.8 percent from the field, and the struggling has bled over to his free throw shooting. A career 78.1 percent free-throw shooter, Z is shooting a mere 71 percent from the stripe so far this season.

If Z can't shoot it like Z, his on-court value to the team decreases dramatically, especially when the Cavs have to face another elite team that poses athletic mismatches for Z on the defensive end.

We're quickly arriving at what might be an unavoidable conclusion: The level of competition provided by the frontcourts of the NBA's other elite, plus the arrival of Shaq, might equal Z as a mismatched part. In which case, his $11.5 million expiring contract is best put to use in a trade for a player who better fits the Cavs' schemes.

With the Cavs preparing themselves to move forward without Delonte West if need be, it would seem that Ferry should want to thoroughly investigate any opportunity to add a high-caliber shooting guard to the roster. Ferry reportedly made a hard push for Stephen Jackson, but the Warriors balked at the Cavs' offer and sent Jackson to Charlotte.

Power forward is another area of potential need. Though J.J. Hickson has, on the whole, looked pretty good since moving to the starting lineup several weeks ago, power forward is still not a team strength -- particularly if Z continues to struggle and Anderson Varejao has to log big minutes at center. Leon Powe could add some beef to the big forward spot upon his return, but that won't be until February at the earliest -- and it would be better to remain conservative with your Powe expectations, given that he'll be returning from an 8-to-10 month rehab stint.

If Ferry can add a perimeter-shooting power forward, the so-called "stretch four" who can help clear out operating space for Shaq, LeBron and Mo Williams in the paint, he has to take a serious look at it.

Ultimately, the best option might be to part ways with Z. It's a potentially painful decision that Ferry could have to make. Z and Ferry are friends going back to their days as Cavs teammates. Z is the longest-tenured Cav, he's waded through a lot of medical adversity and bad basketball to get to where he is, and it would be a sweet stanza of poetry if he could someday be on the podium as the Cavs are passing around the Larry O'Brien Trophy as the NBA champions.

But that celebration might never arrive unless Ferry deals Z for a player who can help this team win in May and June. Right now, Z is having a hard enough time doing his part in November, let alone next spring, when he'll have another season's worth of wear and tear on his aging body.

There is the often-referenced possibility of a trade-and-buyout scenario, which would allow Z to return to the Cavs 30 days later, but once Ferry pulls the trigger on a trade, that matter is between Z and the team that receives him. Z might want

to return to the Cavs because his ties to the team are so deep, because of his loyalty to Ferry, or because he'd like a shot at a ring, even if it means riding the end of the bench. But it would be wise to not assume any of that.

It might come down to the decision to sacrifice Z, his tenure with the Cavs and everything he has meant to the team in the LeBron James era, for a better shot at a title -- and maybe by extension, a better shot at keeping LeBron happy and in a Cavs uniform after this season.

It might be heartbreaking for Ferry to make that trade, but considering what's at stake, the heartbreak could become exponentially worse if Ferry doesn't find the right trade and execute it between now and the February trade deadline.