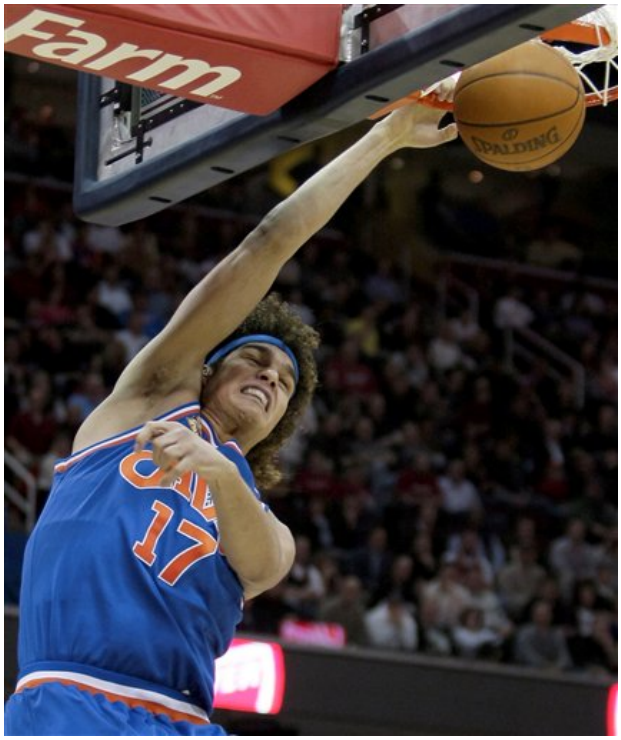

Who needs a real center when you're playing the New York Knicks?

Certainly not the Cavaliers, who are learning to make due with just one man taller than 6-foot-10 in the middle. And that's assuming Anderson Varejao is actually his listed height of 6-11.

The bad news is Shaquille O'Neal is out for up to eight weeks following thumb surgery. The almost-as-bad news is the Cavs don't have Zydrunas Ilgauskas, either -- having traded the longtime center to Washington as part of the Antawn Jamison deal.

The good news is the Cavs have played some of their best basketball of the season without O'Neal or Ilgauskas, who is expected to return to the team in late March after being bought out by the Wizards.

The even better news is the Cavs had the good fortune of playing the dismal Knicks on the same day Shaq went under the knife. The results were predictable, as the Knicks showed little resistance in allowing the Cavs to build a 42-point lead on their way to a 124-93 laugher .

The best news is, even without Shaq and Z, the Cavs still have LeBron James. They still have Jamison and Mo Williams and Delonte West. They still have the forever-improving J.J. Hickson, and Anderson Varejao coming off the bench.

On top of all that, the Cavs' next three games are against New Jersey, Detroit and Milwaukee.

Of those, only the Bucks have a legitimate shot at the playoffs, and even they are pretty iffy. So forget about Shaq and Z for a moment. The Cavs could win the next three games with shooting guard Anthony Parker playing the pivot.

That may be a stretch, but the point is the Cavs are still deep and talented and possess tons of firepower. And you certainly can't complain about how Hickson and Varejao have looked while filling in for O'Neal and Ilgauskas.

Hickson was a big part of the Cavs' second-half rally against the Celtics, providing the energy and athleticism up front the Cavs lacked in the first half. He also made six of seven shots for 17 points against the Knicks.

Meanwhile, Varejao has been his typical self, a hustling big man with no "off" switch. In the past three games (all wins), the Wild Thing has been all arms and legs and made more than a few big shots. Yes, they are crazy shots that make Cavs coach Mike Brown cringe, but they have been going in.

Against the Knicks, Varejao buried a straight-on skyhook that banked in, a couple of reverse layups after cutting through the lane, and a running one-hander while falling away from the basket while on the wrong foot. It's never pretty, but by the end of the game, Varejao had compiled 14 points on 7-for-10 shooting.

Brown laughed off Varejao's wild hook shot, more or less indicating that it was just a case of Varejao being Varejao. But the coach turned serious when talking about what the Wild Thing brings to the team.

"He may not get the recognition because he doesn't score a lot of points, but the people who don't vote for him for the all-defensive team or even Sixth Man of the Year are the people who aren't watching basketball," Brown said. "He impacts the game as well as anyone."

A lot of people have written off the Cavs a few times this season.

First, when they struggled to a 3-3 start as O'Neal adapted to his new surroundings, and his new teammates to him. Then, when the Cavs lost their first three games following the Jamison trade.

Now, everyone is saying they can't win it all without Shaq.

Maybe that's true. Maybe they can't win it all with him. Maybe the assumed returns of O'Neal and Ilgauskas won't even be enough.

But those are some pretty big maybes for a team with the league's best record (47-14) that has barely skipped a beat. In fact, the Cavs look as good now, perhaps better, than they have at any other time this season.

Yes, it helps when you play the Knicks -- but they're on the schedule. Everyone else gets to

play them, too.

What matters is that you prove you’re an elite team when challenged with a few obstacles. Right now, the Cavs are doing exactly that.

Sam Amico covers the Cavaliers and NBA for NBA.com, and is a regular contributor to SportsTime Ohio and The Cleveland Fan.