Gary Benz longs for the days when Indians free agent signings were NOT listed on page C11 of the Plain Dealer sports page, as this weekends signings of Roberto Hernandez and Aaron Fultz were. It's the same 'ole, same 'ole he says. The Indians simply refuse to play ball when it comes to free agents. And the legitmate players they do target ... opt for teams with owners seemingly more committed to building a winner.

It's early Monday morning, a crisp 28 degrees. The first Monday of December. And in the Cleveland sports world, not much has changed, again.

The Indians signed two free agent pitchers. There was a time when this kind of signing would make the front page of the Plain Dealer sports page. Indeed, there was a time it would make the front page of the Plain Dealer news section. But that in a day when the Indians actually went out and signed premier free agents to large contracts.

When Larry Dolan decided to empty his bank account and overpay Richard Jacobs for the privilege of owning the Indians, those days essentially came to a crashing halt. John Hart saw the writing on the wall before most and headed to "retirement" which ended, not surprisingly, when another big-time spender, in the form of Thomas O. Hicks, thought he needed more help in spending his millions. Hart packed for Texas taking with him his calculator, his laptop and his six cellphones.

Since then, the Indians have been reduced to losing their top players via free agency and forced, by frugal ownership, to sign re-treads. That's why the signings of Roberto Hernandez and Aaron Fultz have been greeted with a large shrug and relegated to page C11 in our section of the PD sports page.

We heard the spin: Hernandez is an “ageless wonder.” Fultz has a knack of getting out lefties. But the truth, as everyone knows by now, is that both are stretches that may or may not stabilize a shaky bullpen. Hernandez has a decent track record, but he is, for God’s sake, 42 years of age. When you think about it, the only surprise is that GM Mark Shapiro didn’t sign him for three years. And Fultz, well, he has exactly the kind of spotty track record, particularly of late, that makes him a perfect fit for a GM who, through necessity, is forced to scrape the bottom of the barrel.

We’ve complained at least as much as most about the lack of activity by Shapiro in addressing the team’s needs. So from that perspective, we give Shapiro an E for Effort in at least appearing to get some bullpen help. But in terms of actual help, these signings are closer in comparison to the Browns signing, say, Hank Fraley then to their signing of Dave Zastudil. In other words, there is nothing here to be excited about and, fortunately, no one seems to be. We are well deep into the Dolan ownership phase of this franchise and as fans we now understand how they operate. In other words, if either Shapiro or the Dolans thought these signings would sell more tickets then they are more clueless than Brittany Spears at a Fellini movie. Heck, they’re more clueless than Brittan Spears at a Disney movie for that matter.

The actual bigger news for the Tribe is that they continue to be snubbed by most free agents, even when the Tribe offers appear to be better. We had kind of gotten used to the fact that the premier free agents don’t even consider a viable option. That’s an obvious byproduct of the Dolans reputation. But now even the second and third tier free agents are staying away. Craig Counsell stayed with Milwaukee (!) despite a supposedly better offer from Cleveland. Moises Alou, who, if signed, would have joined Shapiro’s ageless wonder club, took less money to sign with the Mets.

This is probably the development most worth watching because it truly is a “man bites dog” story when a free agent starts taking less money. And while there is a stated reason in each case (Counsell’s agent, said, for example, that Counsell wanted to be closer to his young children), it’s all spin. The truth is that neither these free agents nor their agents see Cleveland as a first tier club willing to do and spend what it takes to get back to the World Series. The agents are more than happy to dump reclamation projects on the Tribe’s doorstep for a year of career rehab, but that’s no way to build and sustain a contender, the Dolans oft-stated goal.

We've said it before and we'll continue to say it until it comes to fruition: the only real hope for this franchise in the long-term is for the Dolans to sell. They simply lack the financial wherewithal to build a winner. And when they luck into one, which they did in 2005, they lack the style and class to live up to their commitments to spend enough to put the club over the top. That's why the Indians in 2006 fell faster than the price on a Braylon Edwards' jersey last week at the Browns team shop.

We'll remain ever hopeful, of course, because that's what we do. But as we've also said many times and will continue to say with respect to the Indians business plan: hope is not a strategy.