Well, we're not going to have ol' Russell Branyan to kick around anymore.

As mysteriously as he was signed, Branyan was just as mysteriously shipped to the Seattle Mariners on Saturday night. No need to go back and check the records. Your memory is correct. Branyan played for the Mariners last season and despite his middling success in the first half of that season the Mariners opted not to sign him in the off season, mainly because he developed back problems and essentially wasted bench space and, well, stood in the way of developing younger players.

The Indians, ever the mercenary good guys of the American League, did Seattle a favor by paying for Branyan's rehabilitation, not to mention nearly a million dollars in salary, to get Branyan right back to where his career stats say he should be: striking out with regularity, hitting home runs occasionally, and playing awful defense consistently.

But if you think all that makes Indians general manager Mark Shapiro look like a sap, you just aren't paying attention. For the Indians' trouble, Shapiro wrestled Seattle's 15th best prospect from their system along with a 21-year old switch hitting shortstop languishing in A ball. Never mind that the Mariners have one of the worst farm systems, depending on whether or not you believe the various rankings. The Indians still got their 15

th

best prospect, Ezequiel Carrera, who won the AA batting title just last season. That's something I guess.

The ignominious end to Branyan's second tour of duty in Cleveland, coming as it did seemingly in the middle of the night, doesn't befit one of the dumbest off-season moves of the Shapiro reign in Cleveland. What most anticipated is that Branyan would probably blow out his back again on one of his patented upper cut swings and slip quietly into oblivion courtesy of the 60-day disabled list.

Now it's likely that will be Branyan's fate as he returns to Seattle, presuming of course that his back doesn't stiff up on the plane ride over.

Now it's Seattle general manager Jack Zduriencik's turn to explain what the heck a team with no chance of winning this season or next is possibly doing signing Branyan. I'll let him explain, courtesy of Geoff Baker's report in the Seattle Times, and if you close your eyes it sounds almost exactly like Shapiro explaining why he signed Branyan as well:

"If you look at our team, as we move forward, just about every player who is here now will be here again next year," Zduirencik said. "We're committed to the development of our players and that goal, that objective, has never changed for us. But part of that development process is also winning games. We want our players to be able to experience winning games this year. And we're trying to do what we can to give them what they need to get there."

As Baker noted, Seattle's pitching has been decent this season but they are hardly scoring any runs, kind of like the Indians except without the decent pitching thing. Reading between the lines, according to Baker, is that Zduriencik is trying to maintain some credibility between the front office and the team on the field.

Exactly how the signing of Branyan will accomplish that isn't any clearer in Seattle than it was here. By my count, Branyan helped the Indians win exactly one game this season. Admittedly when you've only won 26 games overall, perhaps the ratio of 1 in 26 doesn't look that bad. And by the way this isn't even debiting how his miserable defense has probably contributed directly to two or three losses this season. We'll just leave that part alone.

Maybe Branyan hits a key home run or two for the Mariners and instead of the 12 games below .500 and 14 games they're out of first place now they end up only 20 games below .500 and 22 games out of first by season's end. Who knows? But if Zduirencik actually thinks that brings credibility to his franchise, then the Seattle fans are being force fed the same delusional thoughts that Cleveland fans have been on the business end for the last several years.

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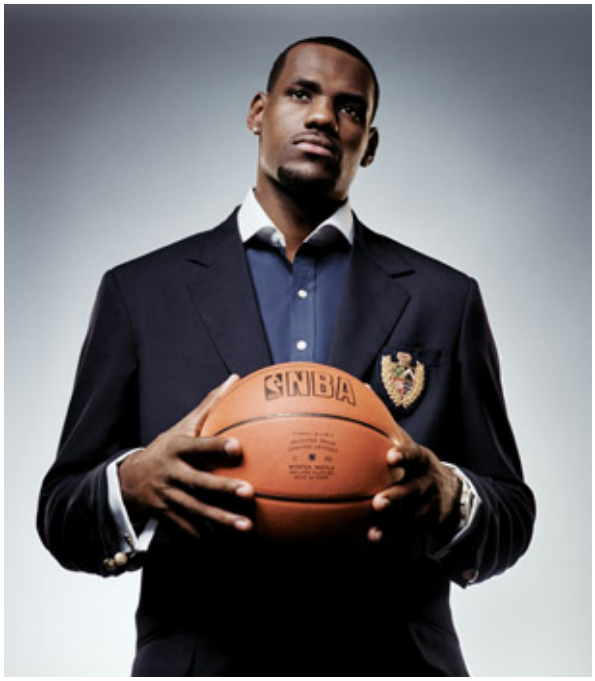

This is the week that Cavaliers fans, along with virtually anyone with even a passing interest in the NBA, have been waiting for, the beginning of Amir Johnson's free agency tour.

Actually, this is the week that Cavaliers fans have been dreading in only the unique way that

Cleveland sports fans in general can dread. So fearful are they that LeBron James will leave Cleveland for anywhere else, Cavs fans have pretty much resigned themselves that for now, of the town's three major professional teams it's the Browns that now offer the most promise.

Maybe that's all part of the grieving process. You see your loved one lying there knowing he or she is terminal and you just start resigning yourself to the outcome. That won't mean of course that the death won't hit you hard. It just means that you've mostly prepared yourself for the sting.

And Clevelanders, whether they admit it or not, are preparing for the sting of a James-less Cavaliers. By this point, and including these several paragraphs, the official count on words written about James and his free agency is approaching one for each dollar in his soon-to-be new contract. And while there isn't a whole lot more to say, there still is some.

For instance, all those daily rumors about James and where he'll land are pretty meaningless, even if entertaining. As these last few days wind down before the real circus begins, remember that James' stated goal is to win multiple championships and about the only thing that will give him any more insight into where that will happen for him than anyone else has is if he has a better crystal ball than anyone else. He doesn't.

Sure teams can clear cap space, but the reason they can do this is because they're mostly miserable and/or poorly run teams that have done a lousy job up to this point in making themselves competitive in the first place, kind of where the Cavaliers were before they got James and a whole new regime along with him.

James brings any franchise instant credibility and a likely playoff run, but he isn't a one-man show. Either was Michael Jordan.

Indeed, for as much as people always talk about how Jordan needed Scottie Pippen in order to start winning championships, the truth is that he needed even more than that. A team with cap space may be able to sign two high profile free agents but even that isn't going to guarantee multiple championships.

That's where the rest of the franchise's track record has to be considered and I keep going back to the same place I started—the track record that put those teams in a position to clear cap space in the first place.

James is an otherworldly talent that doesn't necessarily need another otherworldly talent along side of him to be successful. What he does need though is a complimentary group of players with whom he can always remain in sync.

James doesn't have a college track record for reference, but look at his high school teams. They were talented, certainly, but no one outside of James has played in the NBA. In fact, no one outside of James made much of an impact afterward. There were scholarships, but not to high profile programs.

But these players had an uncanny bond with James. It was a product of not only growing up together but of finding a way to fit in their unique contributions within his overall game.

To a certain extent you can project the same thing in the NBA. James' trajectory in the NBA, at least with the Cavaliers, has followed a similar path. As the complementary players improved, so did James and so did the team. The Cavs were able to eke out those most wins in the NBA for a couple of years now and James was similarly able to eke out the most valuable player award in the same time period because of those complementary players, the same ones he took with him to St. Vincent-St. Mary's high school to pick up the award.

James' play in all star games and at the Olympics has revealed these same traits. He's always played his best with other players in complementary roles. On a team of all superstars, James still shines best when he's part of the overall team dynamic and not the complete center of attention.

Maybe it's part of his psychology that developed as part of a fractured childhoold. But James craves the team dynamic as much as he craves the potential for championships that comes with it.

I have no particular insight into what James is thinking at the moment, but his track record and his best moments suggest that he understands full well what makes him successful. Teams that have been poorly run for years and only now are at the forefront of the James' sweepstakes because of it are probably going to be also-rans in this competition as well because, frankly, there's no reason to think they'll suddenly get good at building teams. They won't.

For Cleveland fans, whether or not James puts the Cavaliers in that category or not will determine his fate here, not the cap space or lack thereof.

**Although NBA free agency begins July 1st, it may be another week or 10 days before James' status is resolved. But it leads to this week's question to ponder: If Cleveland, with all the built in advantages it has to re-sign James nevertheless can't re-sign him, does any Cleveland team have any chance of ever again signing a high profile free agent in his prime?