Here it is the last week of December in the Year of our Lord 2011 and you would think it was December of 2003 or 2004 all over again. In 2003, the Cavaliers were coming off a 17-65 record and had chosen first in college draft. In 2004, the Indians were 80-82 and the Browns were 4-12.

Six o' one, half dozen of another. The more things change, they more they stay the same. Hmmm.

Among the three major professional sports teams here in Northeast Ohio, there are massive uncertainties as we enter 2012. The Indians wasted a fast start; the Browns never even got off to a fast start; and the Cavaliers are trying to forget a 26-game losing streak.

Here, then, are some questions that are certain to be answered before next year at this time:

1) Who will be the Browns' starting quarterback when they break training camp in the

fall?

All indications from the Browns' front office suggest that incumbent Colt McCoy probably is not the answer to the team's decade-long search for an "elite" signal-caller. The situation has not entirely been McCoy's fault; indeed, some say that it hasn't been his fault at all. But that's neither here nor there.

Career back-up Seneca Wallace will not be the starter, nor will rookie third-stringer Thaddeus Lewis.

Which brings us to the free-agent market, headed up by "perennial All-Pros" Kyle Orton, Jason Campbell, Matt Flynn and Donovan McNabb, along with such well-known names (in Cleveland, at least) as Derek Anderson, Brady Quinn and Luke McCown. Frankly, McCoy is a better option than any of those guys, given the respective stages of their careers.

Which brings us to the totally unpredictable trade market. For the purposes of this article, then, let's not even throw an off-season trade into the mix.

That brings us to the spring college draft, where (at this writing) Stanford's Andrew Luck is about 99 percent sure of going to the Indianapolis Colts.

With Matt Barkley's decision to stay at USC, Heisman Trophy winner Robert Griffin III (RG3) of Baylor is universally regarded as second-best QB in the draft. He could fall to the Browns, but to be assured of his availability, the team might have to "trade up" at least both of its current first-round choices. Is GM Tom Heckert brave enough to do that?

Other QB possibilities in the draft include Landry Jones of Oklahoma and Ryan Tannehill of Texas A&M. But again, if you're not going after that one guy with "elite" potential, you may as well stick with McCoy.

In the end, if the Browns do not somehow draft RG3, McCoy will be back, in spite of the problems he (and his father) have experienced this season. Simply put, the Browns don't have a lot of options better than McCoy.

I'm going out on a ledge here, but chances are 55 percent for Griffin and 45 percent for McCoy to be the team's starter next fall.

2) What impact will rookie Kyrie Irving have on the Cavaliers?

Don't know how many of you saw the Cavs' televised pre-season home game against Detroit, but Irving was pretty damned impressive (against an admittedly mediocre team). His behind-the-back-through-the-legs-dribble-drive-kiss-off-the-glass is the stuff that dreams are made of.

Given the current roster, Irving should lead the team in scoring and assists. He'll also lead the team in free-throw shooting. I'm guessing 18 ppg, 6 apg and 84 percent from the foul line.

Throw in Rookie of the Year honors and, uh, that's sort of a pretty strong impact.

3) How many games will the Cavaliers win in the strike-shortened 2011-2012 season?

This is a popular topic on our message boards. Of the 17 geniuses who took a flyer, the average number of wins predicted was 19 (out of 66 games). Which is the exact same amount of victories the Cavs posted last year in 82 games. I guess that can be considered a bit of an improvement.

Unfortunately, the talent on this year's roster hasn't really been upgraded, except for the aforementioned No. 1 draft choice—but neither should we expect another massive losing streak. The early hope is that two floor leaders, Andy Varejao and Antawn Jamison, won't miss huge portions of the season with injuries, like they did last season.

Put me down for 17-49, guys.

4) Who, specifically, are the Browns likely to draft in the first round?

Consensus among the media at this early juncture is that the Browns will take Trent Richardson, RB, Alabama, with their higher pick and Alshon Jeffery, WR, South Carolina, with their lower pick.

But I keep coming back to RG3, who is a scholar-athlete in the true sense of the word: intelligent and physically gifted. I think Heckert tries his darndest to pull the trigger on RG3; I just hope he doesn't give away the farm.

I would be ecstatic if the team ended up with Griffin and Jeffery in the first round. I'd not be so pleased if Richardson was in there somewhere, only because I think Peyton Hillis deserves to be back with the team next year, and the Browns have dire needs at positions other than RB. (It would, however, be ver-r-ry interesting if Shurmur could work a Hillis-Richardson tandem in the backfield.)

Other low first-round choices that the draft experts are touting for the Browns are LB Jarvis Jones of Georgia, LB Kevin Reddick of North Carolina and RB David Wilson of Virginia Tech.

5) Who will start for the Indians in the outfield on Opening Day? At first base?

LF Michael Brantley, CF Grady Sizemore, RF Shin Soo Choo. Those are the safe picks and the picks I'm making.

GM Chris Antonetti has vainly tried to land high-profile free agents, but (1) difference-making players don't want to play for the Indians, and/or (2) owner Larry Dolan won't fork out enough

dough to lure them here.

At first base, it'll be Carlos Santana if the opposing pitcher is right-handed and incumbent Matt LaPorta if we're facing a southpaw, for the same reasons as cited above.

So we're stuck with the same-old-same-old: LF Brantley, CF Sizemore, RF Choo, 1B LaPorta/Santana. That's life at Progressive Field.

6) Will Pat Shurmur return as the Browns' head coach?

With all the mistakes he's made this season and all the miscues his team has committed, there's no way Shurmur returns to the sidelines as the head guy.

Oops. Just kidding. President Mike Holmgren said that Shurmur would be the last head coach he'd ever hire. I'm taking him at his word—despite futile outcries by just about every long-time Browns fan who has ever bought a Bernie Kosar jersey.

7) Which of the current Cavaliers will not be on the roster by season's end?

Jamison is history. With his expiring contract, he'll go to a contender for the stretch run. If Booby Gibson ever gets his long-range shooting eye back, he might well go, too.

It would be a terrible mistake to trade Varejao, but the Cavs' front office excels in terrible mistakes. Give Andy a 50-50 chance of remaining with the team.

After the season ends, a goodly portion of the bench also might get their walking papers. But that's getting ahead of ourselves.

8) Will the Indians finally be sold, as *Forbes* magazine postulates? ("It is likely that owner Lawrence Dolan will sell the team if the franchise's economics do not improve soon.")

The Tribe's monetary value is steadily declining, on pace with the nation's faltering economy. Dolan bought the team in 2000 for $323 million. At its peak this century, its valuation was $417 million. Today, it's down to $353 million.

It would be a godsend if Dolan took his money and went home. But, for 2012, it's also wishful thinking.

9) Can the Browns improve enough over the off-season to at least get out of the AFC North's cellar?

It will be a long, uphill climb, but it's possible.

Despite their rave reviews, the Bengals are getting by with smoke and mirrors and an occasional brain fart by an opposing team's defense. The Ravens are getting pretty long in the tooth, especially on defense. And (I might take this back by Super Bowl week, but) the Steelers are not the super-team they once were or the team that Steeler fans believe they are.

Here's what I, the eternal optimist, see:
>> Shurmur improves his performance after learning from his numerous miscues this season and is bolstered by having a full training camp;
>> Holmgren hires an offensive coordinator to take some pressure off Shurmur;
>> QB play (McCoy or a new "Anointed One") improves;
>> the talented young guys—Greg Little, Jabaal Sheard, Buster Skrine, Phil Taylor, Jordan Norwood, et. al.—grow by leaps and bounds;
>> the college draft and free agency fill some much-needed holes (wide receiver, offensive line, outside linebacker, free safety); and
>> the young, exciting Browns finish 8-8, ahead of the Bengals, their sights set firmly on Baltimore and Pittsburgh in 2013.

(Gawd, talk about wishful thinking!)

10) Will Tribe pitcher Ubaldo Jiminez's performance look more like his 2010 (19-8, 2.88 ERA in the rarified air of Colorado) or his 2011 (10-13, 4.68)?

Jiminez will never have another season like he did in 2010—which bordered on fantastic. For one thing, he's now pitching to designated hitters every fourth day instead of to fellow pitchers. For another thing, he's pitching for the offensively-challenged Indians.

Even if Cleveland tutors can work their magic during this off-season, I look for something like 13-10, 3.95 from the ex-Rockie.

11) What impact will rookie Tristan Thompson have on the Cavaliers?

Over the long haul, the jumping jack may give the Cavs what might be expected from a mid-first-round draft choice. He'll spend most of the season learning to play in the NBA, getting used to the longer schedule, and gutting it out through numerous back-to-back games. Look for about 6-7 ppg, 6-7 rpg and maybe 70 total shot-blocks.

12) One year from now, the Indians will no longer have any long-term contract obligations. Who on the current roster will they choose to cast their future with?

Needless to say, a lot depends on individual performances during the spring and summer of 2012.

Right now, I would say that Justin Masterson is up there at the top of the list with Carlos Santana, Choo and Asdrubal Cabrera.

Next in the pecking order—if they don't totally flame out: Jiminez, Jeanmar Gomez, Chris Perez, Lonnie Chisenhall, Vinnie Pestano, Jason Kipnis, Cord Phelps and Michael Brantley.

Beyond that, it's anyone's guess.