

AFC Contenders – Week 17

Each week we'll take a look at which teams are the top contenders in the AFC

Denver's playoff hopes are officially over, but it's never too early to think about next season. Well, maybe it's a bit early, but Denver should be right back in the hunt next season, and for now the AFC will play on. So if you're still into the conference, read ahead and see how things are shaping up as we head into the last week of the season.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

The Jets, as expected, proved to be no competition for the Patriots. While early talk has indicated that Todd Bowles job may be safe, the Jets were an embarrassment this season, and it wouldn't be shocking to see some major shakeup. The opposite continues to hold true for the Pats who remain the class of the AFC and have to be loving the way the conference has played out this season.

This Week: @ Miami

The Contenders:

Oakland Raiders

The Raiders are the two seed, and can still clinch the one seed with a win against Denver and a Patriots loss, but after Derek Carr suffered a season ending leg injury last week, Oakland's Super Bowl chances took a major hit. More likely, it'll take an absolute miracle for them to make it out of the AFC with backup Matt McGloin leading the way, much less win it all. The Raiders have a lot to be excited about going forward and look to be heading in the right direction as a franchise, but unfortunately, injury will probably prevent them from being much of a legitimate threat.

This Week: @ Denver

Kansas City

The Chiefs swept Denver for the first time since 2000, knocking the defending champs out of the playoffs, boosting their confidence and setting them up in reasonable shape to not only win the AFC West, but lock in a first round bye as well. If Denver can beat the Raiders and the Chiefs take care of business against the Chargers, Kansas City can move up to the two seed. The Chiefs can also be the five seed with a win or Dolphins loss, or the six seed if they lose and Miami wins. Seeding

is still up in the air, but the Chiefs are one of the hottest teams heading into the playoffs.

This Week: @ San Diego

Houston Texans

Marcus Mariota suffered a season ending injury, the Titans suffered a shocking loss to the Jaguars and the Texans snuck out a win over Cincinnati after a late missed FG by their old kicker. The Texans have won three straight since falling back to 6-6 (though they have been by five, one and two points) and will somehow make the playoffs after all. Tom Savage earned his first win, but is still searching for his first touchdown as Houston wraps up against the Titans. Regardless of the result, Houston will remain the four seed and host the Raiders, Chiefs or Dolphins the following week.

This Week: @ Tennessee

Pittsburgh Steelers

Pittsburgh won a thriller against the rival Ravens, eliminating them from the playoffs and sealing their bid as the three seed, likely hosting the Dolphins during wild-card week. When it mattered most, the killer B's stung Baltimore with Big Ben leading multiple clutch drives, Bell scoring two touchdowns and Brown extending over the goal line for the victory. With Pittsburgh really starting to get in a groove offensively, they remain the most likely threat to New England.

This Week: Vs. Cleveland

What to watch this week:

Here are this week's notable AFC games:

New England @ Miami: Seeding at stake. The Patriots historically struggle a bit traveling to Miami, and the question remains whether or not they'll really be going all out in this one. They can lose the one seed with a loss, but only to an Oakland team without their starting QB. Miami can move up to number five, but are in the playoffs regardless.

Oakland @ Denver: One last chance to watch the Broncos, and homefield advantage on the line for the Raiders. Denver may try a lot of younger players in this one, but either way; after this game there are just over eight months until they play meaningful football again.

Kansas City @ San Diego: The Chiefs won't have the luxury of resting their starters, badly needing this game to try to secure the division and a bye. With Arrowhead as an advantage, Kansas City has a great chance at advancing to the AFC Championship, but without a home game they risk going one and done once again.