

AFC Contenders – Week 10

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

A crucial loss to the Raiders was the last thing Broncos fans were hoping to see last Sunday night, but fortunately there is still plenty of season to play. Both the rush defense and offense are major points of concern, but a combination of situational football and injuries can at least take part of the blame. Denver may suddenly find itself third in the AFC West, but with two games remaining against the Chiefs, and the Raiders still at home, it wouldn't be wise to lose faith at this stage.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

No complaints from the Patriots fans, who watched the defending champs and, arguably their biggest AFC threat in the Steelers both fall during their bye week. Tougher competition this week with the Seahawks coming to town, but at this stage, New England can afford a loss.

This Week: Vs. Seattle

The Contenders:

Oakland Raiders

The Raiders looked to be up to the challenge of taking on a talented team last week, and that is exactly the kind of momentum that could make them dangerous going forward. Now that they know they're talented enough to play anyone, the balanced offense has the confidence it needs to survive the second half of the season. The most important part of their win over Denver was revitalizing Latavius Murray as a threat in the ground game, since he had been off to a slower than anticipated start through Week 8. The defense is solid yet unspectacular, but the Raiders have the tools necessary to make a playoff run this season.

This Week: BYE

Kansas City

The mighty AFC West keeps on keeping on. It was close at some points and controversial at others, but the Chiefs knocked off the Jaguars to move to 6-2. The Jaguars aren't great, but this win was made more impressive by the fact that Nick Foles subbed in at QB for an injured Alex Smith, and the team kept it together to pull out the win. The division has put some distance on the rest of the playoff contenders (New England excepted), with all other contenders sitting at four or five losses, and

the idea that three teams from one division could make the playoffs is starting to feel very real.

This Week: @ Carolina

Pittsburgh Steelers

It shouldn't be overstated how poorly the Steelers tend to play in Roethlisberger's first game back following an injury. Pittsburgh rarely wins those games, and last week's was an ugly, ugly performance against the Ravens. Long term, I think the Steelers will be fine this season if they can remain healthy. Their offense remains the best in the league when it's firing on all cylinders, which it is decidedly not right now. The Steelers don't need to worry about making up the 2+ games they currently sit behind the top of the AFC West, they only need to focus on winning their own division; currently tied with the Ravens and a half game up on the Bengals, that is a pretty realistic target.

This Week: Vs. Dallas

Houston Texans

Good bye week for Houston, but it could've been better. Had the Colts lost to the Packers, they'd have been three games up on them in the loss column, with only the 4-5 Titans within reach of the division. Still, 1.5 games up on 2nd and 3rd place must feel good for the Texans, who at times look hopeless yet find themselves in better position within their own division than everyone in the conference but New England. A brutal stretch off the bye awaits them now, with four of their next five games on the road, so Houston will be back to .500 before you know it.

This Week: @ Jacksonville

Who's out?

Each week we'll eliminate one team from contention in the AFC.

Week 10: Cleveland Browns – Glimpses of potential surrounded by repeated disappointment. Without a win through week 9, it's safe to say the Browns will not be a factor this year.

What to look for this week:

Besides Denver-New Orleans, here are the three games to keep an eye on in the AFC:

Kansas City @ Carolina: Carolina refuses to believe they're out of the playoff hunt, and Kansas City needs to keep those wins coming in the tight AFC West race. This should be a fun one to watch.

Dallas @ Pittsburgh: Another week of recovery for Big Ben, with the added bonus of a fire being lit under the team after their poor performance last week could spell trouble for the Cowboys. The NFC's best team travels to Pittsburgh in what will likely be the game of the week.

Seattle @ New England: Great games all day Sunday, with this one closing out the night on NBC. Will the Patriots lose another game this season? A loss here and Denver is back in control of its own fate this season. Just saying.