

AFC Contenders – Week 11

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

It's the little things that can make all the difference in a season. One blocked kick. One inch (maybe?) from Will Parks being out of bounds on the return, and just like that, Denver is back in control of their own destiny. Ironically enough, the Saints were the first team to have ever scored a defensive two-point conversion last year, but never in the NFL's brief history of the play has there been a score as impactful as Denver's. If the Broncos can win out following their bye, they will once again be the one seed in the AFC.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

The Patriots must have been listening to me last week when I said they could afford a loss. Time for them to reestablish their dominance, and the schedulers have given them another gift; the 49ers. As it stands, they're still the one seed and have a comfortable division lead over the rest of the AFC East. Just a minor hiccup for what is still probably the NFL's best team.

This Week: @ San Francisco

The Contenders:

Kansas City

After this week, all three of the top AFC West teams will have had their bye, and with the Chiefs catching up to the Raiders, they now own the tiebreaker and are the de facto AFC West leader. Like Denver has done at times this season, the Chiefs just keep finding ways to win, miraculously coming back from a 17-0 deficit to defeat the Panthers on the road. It wasn't a pretty win, but in the NFL's toughest division, it's the victory that is more important than the style.

This Week: Vs. Tampa Bay

Oakland Raiders

A well timed midseason bye for the Raiders may have technically cost them the division lead, but with head-to-head matchups against KC and Denver still remaining, the "leader" by tiebreaker is less important at this stage. Oakland actually gets an extra day to relax, as they host the division leading Texans on Monday night. The Raiders get the next three at home before finishing up with three of the last four on the road, so this is their golden opportunity to build a lead in the division.

This Week: Vs. Houston

Houston Texans

Despite the Titans surge of late, the Texans still hold a 1.5 game lead in the AFC South, and this week's primetime matchup is as big as it gets for them. Riding only their second winning streak all season, it's time for the Texans to prove to us we should take them seriously. Broncos fans in particular should be rooting for this, because if they can travel to Oakland and knock them off, they'll be feeling confident long after Denver dismantled them, and maybe it kick starts an Oakland collapse down the stretch. 10 weeks into the season, there's little to cause you to believe this could happen other than their Week 2 victory against Kansas City, but Oakland is due for a letdown.

This Week: @ Oakland

Baltimore Ravens

This should be a temporary stay for the Ravens in the contenders list. Their only path to the playoffs is through winning the AFC North, and one game up on the Steelers probably isn't sufficient to hold them off. The Steelers suffered a heartbreaking loss to the Cowboys last week in a back-and-forth game that could've gone either way, and now that they're healthy, Pittsburgh is poised to finish the season strong. It would be surprising if the Ravens can travel to Dallas this week and come away with a victory, but winning a tough road game like that would demand a reevaluation of just how talented Baltimore is.

This Week: @ Dallas

Who's Out?

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

Week 11: Jacksonville Jaguars – I don't think the Jaguars had "not the worst team in the league" in mind when they were thinking of big improvements in 2016. They have been competitive at times, but they came up too short too often and now must focus on how to turn 2017 into a success.

Already Out: Cleveland Browns

What to look for this week:

With Denver on their bye, here are the three games to keep an eye on in the AFC:

Baltimore @ Dallas: By all accounts, Dallas is the much better team. With Romo conceding the QB job to Dak, maybe the young stars on the Cowboys get complacent and Baltimore steals an important victory—but probably not.

Tampa Bay @ Kansas City: The Buccaneers have been fairly inconsistent this season, but the Chiefs haven't exactly been a dominant force either. This one could be close, but probably not close enough.

Houston @ Oakland: Big, relevant primetime game Monday night that every Broncos fan should be monitoring closely. Houston is only a half game back of the Broncos for seeding should they both be division leaders (or both wild card contenders), but Denver owns the tiebreaker and the division lead is the real battle. Root for Houston, passionately.