

AFC Contenders – Week 13

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

No way around it, that loss to the Chiefs is a devastating one for the Broncos. Not only does it make the battle for the first round bye more difficult, it makes the division battle significantly tougher and even threatens the team's chances at returning to the playoffs. Playing in the league's toughest division is beneficial for providing a taste of what the playoffs will be like, but squandering late leads and losing home games is the last thing you'd want to see as we enter the final quarter of the season. An uphill climb awaits, but there is a pretty clear path for Denver to return to prominence, and it starts with a Week 13 win.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

Another shaky week for New England, but in the end it's yet another victory for Brady & Co. This is a team that no longer looks as dominant as it had earlier in the season, with Gronkowski constantly battling injuries, Brady a bit dinged up and the defense looking vulnerable of late. The Patriots are a very beat-able team, the problem for the rest of the AFC is that they are probably still be less beat-able than everyone else. This week figures to be a great opportunity for them to rest their starters and get healthy if they can wrap this one up early.

This Week: Vs. Los Angeles

The Contenders:

Oakland Raiders

The resilient Raiders may soon leapfrog the Patriots as the conference's top dog. A gruesome finger injury to Carr slowed them down momentarily, but immediately after falling behind to the Panthers, they rebounded, tied it up, took the lead and didn't look back. Maybe this team isn't due for a loss after all. Khalil Mack is playing excellent football right now at LB, the defense as a whole is really stepping up and the offense was already pretty well established. If they can keep this complete package going strong the rest of the way, the Raiders have to be considered a Super Bowl favorite right up there with the Patriots.

This Week: Vs. Buffalo

Kansas City

Quick role reversal between the Chiefs and Broncos, as Kansas City looked to be the potential odd team out last week, but now after the comeback win and OT clunker

that snuck in off the uprights, the Chiefs have a leg up on Denver, with a home matchup still remaining. This was a crucial victory for the Chiefs, whose offense looked inept the majority of the game and benefitted greatly from a horrendous special teams performance by the Broncos. Give them credit for capitalizing on Denver's mistakes, but don't think Denver can't go into Arrowhead this year and come away victorious. Like the Chargers game, I would expect the Broncos to play angry next time and overwhelm them, and that could be all it takes to move back ahead in the standings.

This Week: @ Atlanta

Houston Texans

Another week of mediocrity in the AFC South, who would've thought that could happen? The Colts were without Luck so they have a legitimate excuse, the Jaguars found yet another way to lose a game they seemed to have control of, and the Texans—they were thoroughly outmatched against the AFC West's last place Chargers. The Titans barely managed to win, surviving on Bears WR Josh Bellamy's dropped end zone pass in the final minute of the game, and now the Texans lead is down to just half a game. The Titans have a bye, and by this time next week, the South could find itself with three teams tied atop the division.

This Week: @ Green Bay

Pittsburgh Steelers

Pittsburgh's offense, when completely healthy, is a beauty to watch. The Steelers spent Thanksgiving leisurely cruising to a victory against the Colts, though they still find themselves tied atop the North with the Ravens. Both teams have some tough opponents remaining, but I'll still give the nod to the Steelers because they have one matchup with the hopeless Browns to close it out in Week 17.

This Week: Vs. New York Giants

Who's Out?

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

Week 13: Cincinnati Bengals—Give Marvin Lewis credit, the Bengals will not lose in the first round of the playoffs this year. This probably ends his run in Cincinnati, and the extremely disappointing Bengals season continued with a 5 point loss against the Ravens. With the rest of the AFC sitting at 5 or more wins, the Bengals season is unofficially officially over.

Already out: Cleveland Browns, Jacksonville Jaguars, New York Jets

What to look for this week:

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

Kansas City @ Atlanta: It's crunch time. In a tight divisional race, every Chiefs and Raiders game is a must watch. While AFC losses are more helpful for the tiebreaker, every loss matters.

Buffalo @ Oakland: The Bills aren't a bad team, the question is, are they good enough to end the Raiders' five game winning streak? The answer? Probably not.

New York Giants @ Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh has been up and down all season, while the Giants feel like a fluky 8-3. Which one of these teams is for real? I'll take Pittsburgh at home.