

## AFC Contenders – Week 14

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

Denver held up their end of the bargain this week, but couldn't get enough help from the Falcons or Bills to slow down the rest of the AFC West. It was an ugly offensive performance without a doubt, but the defense was about as tough as you could hope for. The win was even more significant with a brutal ending stretch upcoming, about as tough of a closing schedule as possible. The Broncos travel to Tennessee (tied for the AFC South lead), host the Patriots (leading the AFC East), travel to Arrowhead (current 5 seed) then close out at home against the current #1 seed Raiders. It will almost definitely take an undefeated close to win the division, but the playoffs are in sight if Denver can split the remaining four games.

### **The Favorite:**

#### **New England Patriots**

Technically, the Raiders are now the one seed in the AFC. The Patriots have also officially placed Gronkowski on IR, ending his season. Still, they're the Patriots. I'm not quite ready to relinquish the "favorite" spot from them yet even though New England does have a semi-challenging end to their regular season. That makes them just like the rest of the AFC's top contenders in that regard, so the battle for seeding should be exciting down the stretch

This Week: Vs. Baltimore

### **The Contenders:**

#### **Oakland Raiders**

In typical trap game fashion, Oakland trailed the Bills 24-9 and looked like they were going to suffer an untimely defeat, allowing KC to retake control of the division. True to their nature (at least in this season), not only did the Raiders come back, but they wound up winning easily. So what should Broncos fans be rooting for in this week's massive Thursday night matchup between the Raiders and Chiefs? If Denver were to finish ahead of Oakland, they'll essentially be asking for a great Raiders team to lose three of their final four games (possible, given that Oakland doesn't play a team with a losing record) while Denver wins out, or that Oakland's two other losses come to Denver and San Diego, while Denver's only loss is to the Titans. Those scenarios don't factor in the Chiefs, either. In other words, Denver *really* could've used a Bills victory last week.

This Week: @ Kansas City

## **Kansas City**

The Chiefs pull miraculous wins out week after week, and it's getting old fast for Denver fans. A bit hypocritical to be too upset this week, with KC's win coming as the result of a "Pick-2," an INT on the Falcons conversion attempt, returned for two points and the win. Denver's path to finishing ahead of KC is simpler than its path to beating Oakland. The five seed is a much better spot to be in this year's playoffs (that team almost certainly will travel to the winner of the AFC South, as opposed to playing Baltimore or Pittsburgh), so the safer thing to root for as a Broncos fan may be a Raiders win so that it's easier to stay ahead of the Chiefs.

This Week: Vs. Oakland

## **Houston Texans**

As predicted, the AFC South now has three teams tied for first at 6-6. Houston remains the leader with a 3-0 division record, and they remain a confusing case of a first place team. Of all other division leaders, the Lions have the smallest net point differential at +24. The Texans sit atop the South at -50. At some point that has to either creep back towards zero, or else it's tough to imagine they'll actually wind up winning the division. Tennessee will have its hands full with Denver this week, so the Colts-Texans matchup could be pivotal in deciding the race.

This Week: @ Indianapolis

## **Pittsburgh Steelers**

This is Pittsburgh's week to grab on to the division lead and never give it back up. Baltimore travels to New England, while the Steelers get a Bills team that isn't bad—but definitely isn't good. Pittsburgh secured a solid out of conference victory against the Giants last week, surprisingly thanks in part to their defense. Maybe this is the Steelers figuring out how to play more balanced football, and in that case, the rest of the AFC should be put on notice. All the more reason Denver's primary goal should be, beyond simply winning games, to finish as the fifth seed.

This Week: @ Buffalo

## **Who's Out?**

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

Week 14: San Diego Chargers—They have fought hard, the talent was there, but ultimately this was not the Chargers year. Losing to the sudden playoff-contending Buccaneers was the end of the road for them. Three games back of the wild card with four to play, a tough closing schedule and a handful of other contenders to climb past, their season is unofficially officially over.

*Already out:* Cleveland Browns, Jacksonville Jaguars, New York Jets, Cincinnati Bengals

**What to look for this week:**

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

Oakland @ Kansas City: There are pros and cons to each team winning, but I guess the good news in this game is that no matter what happens, a Broncos win will make the division race just a little bit tighter.

Pittsburgh @ Buffalo: Last week I asked if the Bills were good enough to slow down the red-hot Raiders, and said the answer was probably not. Same question this week, if they can shut down the Steelers. Same answer; I doubt it.

Houston @ Indianapolis: Unless there are multiple ties this week, there will not be a three-way tie in the AFC South after Sunday. The Titans are probably the most talented team in the division, the Colts have the best QB and the Texans, well, they're still in the hunt!