

AFC Contenders – Week 16

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

Denver now faces the serious prospect of missing the 2016 playoffs after winning the prior season's Super Bowl. It's not "over" or "hopeless" as some analysts are predicting gloomily, and it's certain that the team has not given up on the season. Right now, Denver's weaknesses are clear, and while they aren't being ignored, it's also proving problematic to fix them with the current personnel. Things started to fall apart when they blew the game against the Chiefs after Thanksgiving, and if they want to right the ship, they have a chance to finish what they should've started last time and beat Kansas City at Arrowhead.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

On a day where Denver's defense did everything right, a costly special teams fumble, a red zone INT and no lucky breaks on other fumbles throughout the game led to a Patriots victory. The Broncos looked like the better team through a quarter, but the continued inability to capitalize in the red zone, coupled with the Patriots continued ability to take advantage of their opponents' mistakes clinched yet another division title for New England. They haven't quite locked up the top overall seed yet, but that could happen this week.

This Week: Vs. New York Jets

The Contenders:

Oakland Raiders

Another week, another flip in playoff positioning for the Raiders and Chiefs. Oakland took care of business (albeit, barely) in San Diego, clinching a return to the postseason for the Raiders and putting them back in the driver's seat for the AFC West crown. If Oakland wins out, they'll be guaranteed no worse than the two seed.

This Week: Vs. Indianapolis

Kansas City

Every game is a battle, and KC finally lost a close one to a good Titans team. The Chiefs are essentially a given for the playoffs, with the one team standing in their way a full two games back with two to play. If the Chiefs beat Denver, or the Ravens lose to the Steelers, the Chiefs are officially in. Don't root for Baltimore though, because Denver still needs Ravens losses to make the playoffs.

This Week: Vs. Denver

Houston Texans

The temporarily AFC South-leading Texans have replaced Brock Osweiler with Tom Savage, and who knows how Brock will handle it when/if he returns as the starter. His struggles have continued all season and with no sign of slowing down, Bill O'Brien made the surprising, yet seemingly inevitable switch. The Titans upset victory over the Chiefs makes things more complicated for Houston, who can only now clinch the playoffs with a win AND a Titans loss this week. In other words, they're in some real trouble now as the two teams square off in Week 17.

This Week: Vs. Cincinnati

Pittsburgh Steelers

If you play fantasy football and have a few Steelers on your team, chances are you left your playoff matchup pretty disappointed last week. Pittsburgh used six (!) FGs to beat the Bengals, in a game they trailed most of the way. Fortunately for Pittsburgh, fantasy implications have no effect on their playoff hopes, and a win this week clinches the division and likely three seed. Even a loss to Baltimore this week probably doesn't prevent them from at least making the playoffs, with the Browns on deck in Week 17.

This Week: Vs. Baltimore

Who's Out?

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

Week 16: Indianapolis Colts: Again, the Colts aren't *officially* eliminated from the playoffs, but at 7-7, they'd need to win out and pass a bunch of teams in the process. Of those teams ahead of them, they don't hold a tiebreaker head-to-head with Denver or Houston, and they're third in their own division race. They can win the division if they win out and have the Texans lose out, with the Titans also losing this week...OR they can win the Wild Card if it's only the Dolphins and Colts at 9-7. Neither of those scenarios is remotely likely, so Luck and the Colts will need to wait until next year.

Already out: Cleveland Browns, Jacksonville Jaguars, New York Jets, Cincinnati Bengals, San Diego Chargers, Buffalo Bills (unofficially)

What to look for this week:

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

Miami @ Buffalo: Easy one here, even though the Bills aren't *technically* eliminated, if both teams tie at 9-7, Denver has the edge. Since Miami is currently a game ahead of Denver, a loss here would be crucial for getting the sixth seed.

Baltimore @ Pittsburgh: Another easy one, in a different potentially competitive AFC matchup. Denver wouldn't have a tiebreaker over Baltimore, so a Steelers win here is key, since they're likely to make the playoffs regardless.

Indianapolis @ Oakland: It will feel weird, but Denver needs Oakland to win this one. A win ensures that the Patriots will have something to play for in Week 17, needing to win to lock up homefield advantage. New England trying in Week 17 is important because they're playing the Dolphins, and a Dolphins loss, as pointed out earlier, is big for Denver.