

AFC Contenders – Week 3
by Ben

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

The season is young, but the experienced Broncos defense is picking up right where they left off. Miller sacked Luck three times on his own, Talib picked him off for his ninth career pick-six and the team joined four other AFC competitors at 2-0. It won't be an easy path to Houston this year, but undefeated is a great way to start. This year's biggest threats to the Broncos' crown should seem familiar; think of the regulars. The most obvious obstacle to repeating will be getting by the Patriots, with serious threats looming in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and maybe even Houston.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

It seemed like Jimmy Garoppolo was shaping up to be quite the suitable Brady replacement for four games, but after suffering a sprained AC Joint injury, the Patriots now may be forced to turn to rookie Jacoby Brissett. If Brissett does indeed wind up starting, he won't have much time to prepare, as the Patriots get a tough test this Thursday night against the Texans. Regardless of who starts, who they sign (even Manning was "rumored" by some in the media to be a Pats target) or how they finish these last two games without Brady, it's clear that this team is the AFC favorite. Make no mistake, this is as talented and balanced as the Patriots have been in years, and the battle for home field will be key in determining who will represent the AFC.

The Contenders:

Pittsburgh Steelers

Just as it has gone in recent years, the Steelers will go as far as their defense will allow them. The offense is perhaps the league's best and most balanced with top five players at QB, RB and WR. Pittsburgh is off to a good start, having defeated AFC North rival Cincinnati after demolishing the Redskins. Denver won't play the Steelers in the regular season but are likely to compete throughout the season for seeding.

Houston Texans

Through two games, Brock Osweiler is playing about as well as most Broncos fans would've expected; good enough. The Texans are 2-0 and will count on their defense to get them into the playoffs, but will need Brock and the offense to do *just enough* to keep them moving. Looking forward to an Osweiler reunion? So were the networks. The

Texans will make their way into Denver in Week 7 on primetime, Monday Night Football. Don't focus too heavily on the Brock angle however, because this could shape up to be one of the team's bigger early season matchups.

Cincinnati Bengals

It has been a tough stretch to start the season for the Bengals, opening up against the Jets, Steelers and Broncos. The good news? It gets much, much better for them. That's actually bad news for Denver, and more reason why this early season game means much more than just going 3-0. The best tiebreaker to own is the head-to-head win, and locking that in early vs. a potentially dangerous Bengals squad should make even the most pessimistic of Broncos fans sleep a little easier.

Baltimore Ravens

It wasn't pretty at times, but the Ravens are the last of the 2-0 AFC teams, so they belong in the conversation for now. It should be concerning that they found themselves down 20-0 to the Browns, but a well-coached team with just enough pieces could develop nicely throughout the season and surprise some people.

What to look for this week:

Besides Broncos-Bengals, here are the four games that may matter most in the AFC race:

Houston @ New England: Meaningful Thursday Night Football! The early AFC East leader takes on the early AFC South leader. This could be the one the Pats lose without Brady.

NY Jets @ Kansas City: Two playoff hopefuls with losses to good teams, one will wind up on the wrong side of .500 after this. Expect a defensive struggle, unless Fitzpatrick can keep the magic going.

San Diego @ Indianapolis: The Jaguars were many pundits' Cinderella team this year, which makes San Diego's dominating performance in Week 2 all the more surprising. On the other end, the Colts are still winless. If they can't win this one at home, it could be a long season.

Baltimore @ Jacksonville: Will the Jaguars finally make a playoff run this season? If they plan on it, this would be a great place to start, home and facing one of the AFC's five 2-0 teams.