

AFC Contenders – Week 4

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

After what was perhaps the Broncos most impressive win to date, it might have become easy to wonder if this contenders list should contain just one other team. Of course it's far too early to narrow it down quite so much, but the rest of the AFC did little to inspire any confidence in Week 3. All the other top teams suffered pitiful losses, the kind that make you wonder if they're even worthy of making the playoffs. Plenty of football to go, and the contenders list may very well look entirely different by the time the Broncos reach their bye.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

"Favorite" is an understatement when referring to the Patriots. One of the most bizarre stats to start the season, in my opinion, is the list of starting QBs leading the five remaining undefeated teams in the NFL; Garoppolo/Brissett for the Patriots, Flacco for the Ravens, Siemian, Wentz for the Eagles and Hill/Bradford for the Vikings. The Patriots embarrassed the Texans last week, and that's putting it mildly. 27-0 with their third string QB, and New England continues to laugh at the rest of the league. Denver has looked great, but until the two teams meet, it's hard to say definitively which one will come out on top.

The Contenders:

Baltimore Ravens

Can the Ravens be trusted? If you're looking purely at their record, then sure, they're the last of the three undefeated AFC teams and alone in first place in the AFC North. This is a team that last year had a statistically improbable rough time, going 5-11 while an astounding 14 of their 16 games were decided by eight points or fewer. Only the '94 Giants played in that many close games in a single season, and now it seems as though the odds are shifting back in their favor, with wins in their three games by a grand total of 13 points. At this point, I'm more inclined to believe it's just math that has the Ravens at 3-0, and not the makings of a serious AFC threat.

Pittsburgh Steelers

It was pretty surprising to see a Steelers team so many thought so highly of play so poorly against the Eagles, but even the best teams sometimes come out flat early in the season. That it came against the cross-state rival Eagles is a bit alarming, but Pittsburgh gets star running back Le'veon Bell back this week and will try to rebound against a talented Kansas City team.

Kansas City Chiefs

Speaking of the Chiefs, they might have put up some record numbers in your fantasy football league with their defense last week, though perhaps that speaks as much to the ineptitude of Ryan Fitzpatrick as it does to their own talent. At 2-1, things are looking promising in Kansas City. Jamaal Charles should return shortly and their schedule is pretty favorable to make a playoff run. Working in Denver's favor, in addition to the current one game division lead, is the fact that the first matchup between these two teams takes place in Denver in Week 12, right after the Broncos bye.

Cincinnati Bengals

The Texans and Raiders are both 2-1, but I'll give the last contender spot this week to a team far more likely to make the playoffs. The Texans just lost JJ Watt to the IR, the Raiders have a tough race to contend with in the West and the Bengals should be given a little slack for their opening slate of games. Against the Broncos, Cincinnati looked competent and talented, but Siemian was finally able to put the finishing touches on a few drives and ultimately that was too much for the Bengals to handle. It's too early for "must-win" games, but a Thursday night matchup against the Dolphins, at home, is one that you really can't lose if you're a playoff threat.

What to look for this week:

Besides Denver-Tampa, here are the three games that may matter most in the AFC race:

Miami @ Cincinnati: Another Thursday night game with at least one AFC playoff contender, hopefully this one is a little bit more competitive than last week's.

Buffalo @ New England: The Bills defeated the Cardinals pretty convincingly last week, so could they be the threat that takes down New England? If the first three weeks of the season have taught us anything, fans shouldn't get their hopes up.

Kansas City @ Pittsburgh: We're in for a treat on Sunday night. The Steelers are probably still one of the top teams in the AFC, and a game against the Chiefs provides the Broncos with a great opportunity to go two games up on one of these AFC foes.