

AFC Contenders – Week 6

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

It may be easy to harp on the negatives following a disappointing home performance, but perhaps it is best to reflect on what was an incredible nine game winning streak dating back to last season. While technicalities and tiebreakers have the Raiders leading the AFC West, there is plenty of football still to be played and plenty of time for the true top teams of the conference to reach the top. One minor setback to an NFC team is certainly not the end of the world for the defending champs.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

I wouldn't put much stock into the "look at how an angry Tom Brady is going to play all season" theory that is making the rounds. The Browns are likely the league's worst team, currently the only squad without a win. It's not inconceivable to believe that a Paxton Lynch led Broncos team couldn't put in the exact same performance. Having said that, if you're a Patriots fan, you couldn't have asked for a much better effort. Much bigger test this week with the Patriots taking on the suddenly desperate Bengals.

This Week: vs. Cincinnati

The Contenders:

Pittsburgh Steelers

Another week, another Steelers beat-down of an AFC team. Last week's victim was the NY Jets, in a game that seemed close at the half, but never really felt like a contest. Roethlisberger threw for four more touchdowns, nearly 400 yards and found four different guys to feed often, with Coates, Bell, Brown and tight end Jesse James each recording 6+ receptions. The Steelers and Patriots appear to be a cut above the rest in the AFC and will be the top competition for a first round bye.

This Week: @ Miami

Oakland Raiders

The Raiders are making a habit out of squeaking out nail-biting victories. With a net point differential of just +5, you would think their one loss was a blowout. You would be wrong though, as just like Denver, the Raiders lost to the Falcons at home by a touchdown. Thrown into the contenders list for the first time last week, Oakland shows no signs of leaving any time soon with an offense that's top 10 in

every major category. There is a glaring weakness that could still be exposed, and it's on the other side of the ball. Ranked dead last in yards allowed per game, 26th in points allowed and tied for 27th in sacks, the one thing preventing the Raiders defense from being a complete disaster is their knack for coming up with turnovers. If their luck on recovered fumbles runs out (they are currently tied for the league lead), the defense could cost the Raiders some key football games down the stretch.

This Week: Vs. Kansas City

Houston Texans

The way the season is shaping up, it would not surprise me if the entire AFC South finished 7-9 this season. The Vikings may be one of the top teams in the NFL, but last week's debacle probably provided more evidence towards the Texans being pretenders. As long as they can string together enough wins to finish 8-8, they still have a great chance at making the playoffs by winning the division.

This Week: Vs. Indianapolis

Baltimore Ravens

There are only two other AFC teams with a winning record, and while it's tempting to throw Rex Ryan and the comeback Bills into the list, we'll pump the breaks for at least one more week. It may only take one more week though, with Baltimore in the midst of a two game skid and a trip up I-95 to take on the NY Giants this week. Baltimore had their fair share of tough breaks last Sunday; a very late go-ahead TD was overturned by replay, and an sure pick-six was fumbled out of the end zone instead for a touchback. But that's football, and so far, the Ravens are continuing on the path of good enough, but not great.

This Week: @ NY Giants

What to look for this week:

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

Cincinnati @ New England: Pundits are starting to write off the Bengals, and everyone is back all-aboard the Patriots bandwagon. If this were in Cincinnati, I would say this has the making of an upset. In Massachusetts it's possible but will be pretty difficult.

Kansas City @ Oakland: If you stopped due to their irrelevance, it's absolutely time to start rooting against the Raiders again if you're a Broncos fan. KC may wind up being a threat, but for now they're a game and a half back of Oakland and Denver.

Indianapolis @ Houston: It's pretty likely one of these two teams will represent the AFC South. It's also pretty likely this won't be a very entertaining game, but tune in anyway since Houston comes to Denver in Week 7.