

AFC Contenders – Week 7

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

Another week and another disappointing loss for Denver, but some favorable scheduling gives the Broncos a quick opportunity to right the ship. Brock Osweiler returns to Denver this Monday night after the team gets an extended period of rest. In addition to getting the guys healthy, the extra downtime should allow them to re-evaluate where they stand and make some necessary adjustments. Motivation for this one should not be an issue, and the Raiders Week 6 loss keeps the Broncos at the top of the division, which should keep the panic at bay.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

Cincy played them tough in the first half, but the Patriots moved to 78-0 at Gillette when leading at the half. As if they needed a gift, the Patriots lucked their way into playing in Pittsburgh at their weakest point all season, without Ben Roethlisberger. Beyond their late season journey to Denver, this was one of the toughest games remaining for New England on paper, but now it appears that it'll be just another stop on the Patriots' victory tour.

This Week: At Pittsburgh

The Contenders:

Pittsburgh Steelers

Fortunately for Pittsburgh, it doesn't appear that Big Ben will miss too much time. A battle against New England this week may have resulted in a loss regardless, and with a timely Week 8 bye, it's conceivable that his injury won't have a major effect on their season. Even with Roethlisberger though, last week's performance against one of the league's worst teams was abysmal and inexcusable. The second true stinker out of the Steelers this year, this team is beginning to establish itself as a premier, yet very beatable threat.

This Week: Vs. New England

Oakland Raiders

As Denver also experienced this week, divisional road games can be a complete toss-up. The Chiefs dominated this one throughout, and truthfully, the Raiders were probably due for a clunker. Good thing for the Broncos, but the division race is tightening up as we approach the season's midway point. Vegas may be hoping the

Raiders relocate to the area, but this week they seem to be predicting an Oakland loss, with the Jaguars opening up as favorites.

This Week: @ Jacksonville

Houston Texans

Teetering on the edge of bust and great signing with every play, Osweiler rebounded towards the latter after managing to bring the Texans back on Sunday Night Football. With the win, the Colts fall to two games back, while the Titans and Jaguars are 1 and 1.5 games back respectively. For looking quite mediocre all season, the Texans are actually in a good spot at this stage. This week will be another big test for the team, and if the season is following any kind of pattern, expect them to disappoint greatly.

This Week: At Denver

Buffalo Bills

Last week the Ravens held the final contender spot, but all season they have felt like a team that did not truly belong. Perhaps Buffalo doesn't either, but we will get a nice glimpse as to whether they can remain competitive after seeing how they perform the next three weeks. Road battles, the suddenly confident Dolphins and the always tough Seahawks, sandwiched around a home game against the Patriots. Probably ambitious for Bills fans to hope for anything better than 5-4, but if they come out of the other side at 6-3, watch out.

This Week: @ Miami

What to look for this week:

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

New England @ Pittsburgh: We were likely robbed of a great game once Roethlisberger was officially ruled out for this week, but this battle of AFC heavyweights still could be interesting.

Oakland @ Jacksonville: Slim pickings for intriguing AFC matchups this week, so tune in to this one to root against a division rival.

New Orleans @ Kansas City: See above. Light week of competitive battles in the conference, so while Denver needs to focus on winning games, seeing AFC West teams falter is beneficial as well.