

AFC Contenders – Week 8

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

Let the revenge tour continue for the Broncos. After thoroughly shutting down the Texans and Brock Osweiler on Monday Night Football, the Orange & Blue stay in Denver ready to take aim at the suddenly resurgent Chargers on Sunday. After beating Denver, San Diego one-upped the Broncos, beating the Falcons and beginning to look like more of a threat in the AFC's best division. With many question marks still surrounding the Broncos, all they can do is knock out one division foe at a time. A win this week could mark the beginning of the end for the Bolts.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

Even when this game became close, I can't imagine very many people seriously thought the Steelers would pull it out. Like every other good team this season, the Patriots are far from perfect, but they definitely sit a cut above the rest through seven weeks of the season.

This Week: @ Buffalo

The Contenders:

Pittsburgh Steelers

All things considered, not a bad performance by the Steelers and Landry Jones. That's some good news for a team that truly has no idea when their starting QB will return, and even better for them that a well-timed bye gives them this week off. Big Ben insists he can be back in Week 9, but Week 10 is probably a more pragmatic prediction. One thing is certain, however. At 4-3 and a full game up on the Ravens and Bengals, the Steelers will remain in sole possession of first place after this weekend.

This Week: BYE

Oakland Raiders

Still technically the first place team in the AFC West, the Raiders trounced Jacksonville, easily winning a game many thought they could have lost. Oakland continues to get impressive production out of their offense, and even the not-so-impressive pass defense exceeded expectations against a Jaguars team with a few weapons of their own. Of all the teams in the AFC though, Oakland has one of the

toughest remaining schedules including both games against Denver. If the Raiders survive the AFC West and wind up on top, they'll have earned it.

This Week: @ Tampa Bay

Kansas City

Three AFC West teams sit at 4-2 or better through Week 7, but the Chiefs are a definitive cut below the other two. Their two losses (a blowout to the Steelers and a 7-point setback against the Texans) prove that while they're improving and are a threat to keep an eye on, they're not quite there yet. Despite that, they're more of a threat than any team you'll find in the AFC South at the moment, so it's time to add them to the list. Let's see if that still holds true after their test against one of the South's many mediocre teams this week.

This Week: @ Indianapolis

Buffalo Bills

We're starting to get a clearer picture as to who are true contenders are going to be down the stretch. The Bills have the makings of a team that could fall anywhere between the five seed and the tenth best team in the conference, but they're likely to at least be in the conversation late in the season. Still, the beginning of the tough stretch I mentioned last week did not start as planned. The loss at Miami was tough, and I'm sure the last thing they'll want to see is an angry Patriots team looking for revenge this weekend. A loss puts them back at .500, which means they could be hungrier than New England, but a season sweep against the Patriots sounds unrealistic.

This Week: Vs. New England

What to look for this week:

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

New England @ Buffalo: The Patriots are beatable, just far less beatable than everyone else. Rex Ryan getting them at home sometimes has the makings of an upset, but are the Bills actually talented enough?

Kansas City @ Indianapolis: The season is still young enough that both of these playoff hopefuls can lose a game and survive, but the winning team in this game is in much, much better shape than the loser.

Oakland @ Tampa Bay: Back to back road games for Oakland, and another week where they have to play an east coast team. The Buccs aren't great, but these are the

exact situations where a team like the Raiders suffers a “surprising” loss. Look for Tampa to come out strong this week.