

AFC Contenders – Week 9

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

The AFC West continues to win, the Patriots continue to be the team to beat, and the rest of the conference continues to be exceedingly mediocre. As we officially enter the second half of the season, Denver must avoid the trap that some former 6-2 Broncos teams found themselves in, missing the playoffs entirely. With such a competitive division, each week is crucial towards playoff positioning, and a showdown with the rival Raiders is exactly what the team could use to reclaim the outright lead.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

There's not much to write about the Patriots, who are still clearly the best overall team in the league. Tom Brady's first four games back have been flawless; he became the first QB to have 12 touchdowns and 0 interceptions through his first four games since Manning did it for Denver in 2013. After the 41-25 beating of the Bills, even Rex Ryan conceded that the division race is over at this point.

This Week: **BYE**

The Contenders:

Pittsburgh Steelers

Ben Roethlisberger has been practicing this week and looks like he may actually have a shot at playing in a pivotal divisional matchup. The Bengals couldn't close the gap with the Steelers last week, although technically they didn't lose any ground either with their tie. As a result, Pittsburgh is still a game up with their QB likely returning. A loss to the Ravens opens up the entire division (with the exception of the Browns), but a win feels like it could secure the top spot for Pittsburgh.

This Week: **@ Baltimore**

Oakland Raiders

Somehow, some way, the Raiders won a game on the road in which they set the record for most penalties ever committed in an NFL game. Twenty three times, 23, there were penalties accepted against them, and that's leaving out the ones that were declined! It took overtime, and despite Sebastian Janikowski's best efforts to cost his team the game with missed kicks, Carr looked fantastic and Oakland pulled it out. This week's test is definitely the Raiders toughest to date, and should provide a good indication of whether or not this team will hang around towards the finish.

This Week: Vs. Denver

Kansas City Chiefs

Now 5-2 after soundly defeating what we can now clearly agree is a poor Colts team, the Chiefs remain right in the hunt. It almost feels like all three of these AFC West teams might make the playoffs, and an easy three game stretch of Jacksonville, Carolina and Tampa Bay means that Kansas City might travel to Denver in Week 12 at 8-2.

This Week: Vs. Jacksonville

Houston Texans

Fine, Texans, you can return to the contender list. Not because the victory over the Lions was impressive, but more a result of their lackluster division and success against weaker teams. While a contender for the playoffs, these Texans are no threat to the AFC crown, and I can't see anything that happens in the second half of this season changing that. Hopkins could turn it around and the offense might be able to put it together enough to the point where they are good, but the talent just isn't there for a deep playoff run.

This Week: BYE

What to look for this week:

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

Jacksonville @ Kansas City: Jacksonville has plenty of talent, but they haven't been able to figure it out so far this season. If they can put it together against the Chiefs, Denver would be very appreciative.

Pittsburgh @ Baltimore: The Ravens are reeling, and the Steelers have shown flashes of brilliance this year. At home in a big rivalry game, anything goes, but common sense would say the Steelers pull it out.

Tennessee @ San Diego: San Diego looks to be out of it, but you never really know this early. Tennessee meanwhile sits just one game back of the Texans, and Mariota and the team have been looking better and better each week. One of these two teams could still make the playoffs, believe it or not.