

AFC Contenders – Week 5

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

One quarter of the way through the season and the champs are officially back on top. No tiebreakers to settle, no arguments to be made and no other undefeated teams in the conference. Paxton Lynch filled in nicely at QB, which is a promising sign (and perhaps further proof that John Elway the GM may even be better than Elway the QB), and Denver now heads back home with another challenge awaiting their defense; the Atlanta Falcons and their 478 yard per game offense.

The Favorite:

New England Patriots

Denver needed the freedom to have an awful game and keep ground with the Patriots, and with a badly injured Patriots offense suffering its first loss to Rex Ryan's Bills, that's exactly what they got. The Patriots looked vulnerable on offense, but until they play that way with Tom Brady and Rob Gronkowski, I wouldn't start calling them overrated.

This Week: @ Cleveland

The Contenders:

Pittsburgh Steelers

All it took was 60 minutes of football to erase the memory of their disappointing loss to the Eagles. The Sunday night game last week was supposed to be one of the week's best, instead the most exciting part was when you finally decided you could do something else with your night. The true potential of the Roethlisberger-Bell-Brown combination showed itself against what was previously considered to be an above average Chiefs defense, and the result was scary. Big Ben had four TD passes in the first half alone, Bell averaged 8 yards per rush over 18 carries and Brown added two more touchdown receptions of his own.

This Week: Vs NY Jets

Oakland Raiders

Here come the Raiders. After squeaking by the Ravens in a wild game that featured four 4th quarter touchdowns, Oakland is setting themselves up nicely at the quarter mark for a playoff run. Their lone loss was a one touchdown contest against the Falcons (who may actually be good!), so they currently sit at 3-0 in conference. The offense leads the way for Oakland, who is currently 5th in the NFL in rushing and 9th in passing. Don't sleep on that passing game either; the Raiders dynamic duo at WR

rivals that of Denver's, with Amari Cooper and Michael Crabtree combining for the same number of receptions, one additional yard and one less touchdown than Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders. While the defense isn't nearly the same type of threat, they will be a formidable opponent this season and will be a tough win on the road.

This week: Vs. San Diego

Baltimore Ravens

At this stage, the Ravens appear to be a slightly above-average team with a chance to make the playoffs. They are the kind of team led by veterans in all three phases of the game (you may have forgotten they signed Devin Hester, who already has a few big returns), which makes them a contender on a weekly basis. You can't overlook them if they're on the schedule, but you shouldn't feel too intimidated either if you're prepared. With the parity in the league the way it is, that fits the description of a five or six seed pretty well.

This week: Vs. Washington

Houston Texans

By default, the Texans are in the playoff hunt. Too critical? Houston leads the AFC South despite a whopping -4 net points on the season. They have six touchdowns on the season, last among teams with a winning record. Their best defensive player (JJ Watt) is on injured reserve. Oh and their next three games? On the road against Minnesota, home versus the Colts and on the road again at Denver. And yet, here they sit at 3-1 with a two game advantage on the rest of the division.

This week: @ Minnesota

What to look for this week:

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

New York Jets @ Pittsburgh: The Jets have faced a tough schedule to start the season and it isn't getting easier as they catch the Steelers in Pittsburgh after a complete dismantling of Kansas City.

San Diego @ Oakland: Tough to root for any divisional rival, but easy to root against the Raiders. A loss for the Chargers and they might have to already start thinking ahead to next season.

Houston @ Minnesota: Since it appears that no one else wants to win the AFC South, let's see what the divisional leader can do against one of the NFC's top teams.

New England @ Cleveland: What better way to rain on the Patriots' parade than to watch them lose to the previously winless Browns? Okay, okay, it's at least worth tuning in for a few minutes to see how New England looks with their beloved QB back under center.