

# Raiders, Broncos will battle in West

Analysis by Jim Ballard  
Senior Reporter

When talking about the AFC's western division, usually two things come to mind: the black and silver of the Los Angeles Raiders, and the bright blue and orange of the Denver Broncos.

The Raiders and the Broncos again should be the dominant teams in the West this year, with both having excellent shots at making the playoffs.

The Raiders' hopes of another successful season rely on the AFC's, if not the NFL's, premier running back, Marcus Allen. The former Heisman Trophy winner led the NFL last season in rushing with 1,759 yards and added 555 yards through the air with 67 receptions.

After Allen, the Raiders' only other offensive threat will be tight end Todd Christensen. Last year he hauled in 82 passes for 987 yards and six touchdowns. However, second-year man Jessie Hester and Dokie Williams could cause some excitement at their receiver positions.

The only problem, though, is the man throwing those passes, Marc Wilson. Wilson had a mediocre season last year and probably won't do much better this year. Backup quarterback Jim Plunkett is entering his 16th year and should retire. That means the Raiders could be relying more on former Oklahoma State star Rusty Hilger, who wasn't exactly dazzling in limited playing time last year as a rookie.

However, the thing that makes the Raiders an almost great football team (besides Allen), is the defense.

Last season they finished fourth in

total defense in the NFL, and wound up with 65 sacks.

Why is the Raider defense so good? Howie Long.

Long has emerged as possibly the best defensive lineman in the NFL, which causes him to be double and triple teamed quite often. This lets the rest of the raiders defense do its thing, and with guys like Matt Millen, Rod Martin, Lester Hayes and Mike Haynes the Raiders could be tough to beat.

The Denver Broncos were 11-5 last season, the third best record in the league, and didn't even make the playoffs.

This year could be a different story, however, if Bronco quarterback John Elway can continue to put up his impressive numbers, but not make dumb mistakes when it really counts.

Elway completed 327 passes last year for 3,891 yards, which was second in the NFL. He also led the league in total offense with 4,144 yards, while throwing 22 touchdowns.

Elway also has some good hands to be throwing to in veteran wide receiver Steve Watson, and Van Johnson who had a good rookie season.

Like the Raiders, though, the Broncos are going to have to rely on a tough defense to win ballgames.

Up front the Broncs have solid experience in nose tackle Rubin Carter and end Rulon Jones. However, Carter is being pushed at his position by second-year nose tackle Greg Kagen.

All-Pro Karl Mecklenberg anchors the linebacking corps, with Pro Bowler Dennis Smith heading up the defensive secondary.

After the Raiders and Broncos, the

level of talent may drop off a bit, but the San Diego Chargers, Seattle Seahawks and the Kansas City Chiefs aren't cream puffs either.

The Chargers have the veteran Dan Fouts, and even though he's already been in the league for 14 years and getting a little on the gray side, he can still put the ball in the air.

The Chargers are in trouble on the defensive side of the ball.

Last year as a team they ranked last in the NFL in total defense. To try to solve that problem, seven of their top nine draft choices were defensive players. That included All-American tackle Leslie O'Neal out of Oklahoma State.

Seattle was 8-8 last season, and returns this year to find one of the roughest schedules in the NFL facing them. Their opponents for 1986 combined to win 57.4 percent of their games last season.

The Seahawks made a good move in the draft this year as they picked up Florida star John L. Williams. Williams should take some of the pressure off star running back Curt Warner.

Receiving is the major strength for Seattle, as reliable Steve Largent and youngster Daryl Turner make Dave Kreig look better than he actually is.

On defense the Seahawks don't have any big name players, with the exceptions of Kenny Easley and Jacob Green, but they play well together as a team.

The Kansas City Chiefs return again this year without an offensive attack and a questionable defense.

The Chiefs finished last in rushing for the third straight year, and picked up veteran Mike Pruitt to help them out in that area.

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