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Super Bowl plans on honoring astronauts

By Mark Babineck
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOUSTON — What likely will go down as Houston's darkest date of 2003 promises to be its brightest in 2004, though organizers of the Super Bowl next Feb. 1 say they want to temper festivities with remembrances of the seven astronauts who died one year earlier aboard Columbia.

"We have not finalized our plans in that regard," Harry Gee Jr., a Houston Texans part-owner and local attorney who chairs the community relations effort of the Houston Super Bowl Host Committee, said Wednesday. "But certainly, we want to commemorate the honor of the astronauts, people who gave of themselves for this country."

"We are coordinating with the NFL, requesting of them the opportunity and their participation."

When space shuttle Columbia disintegrated over East Texas in an area as close as 100 miles to Houston — home of the Johnson Space Center and its astronauts — among the local events canceled that day was a "Countdown Houston!"

party as officials looked forward to the big game a year later.

The NFL has a history of marking solemn occasions, such as the opening weekend of games just prior to the one-year anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, when home teams

of the tragedy, so they discussed it and said, "We're going to have to come up with a plan to recognize it in the right way," Aiello said, adding that the league already has had "extensive discussions with NASA" to figure out how to do just that.

The space program already was a part of the 2004 Super Bowl landscape by virtue of the NFL-designed official logo, which mixes old west-style letters with two stars, a Saturn-like ring and another, more space-age font.

Evelyn Husband, widow of shuttle commander Rick Husband, said Houston's second Super Bowl shouldn't be ruined by the sadness of the occasion.

"We're living every day this dual existence where there are things that we very much enjoy that are festive, but we are filled with sadness as well, and I'm sure the Super Bowl will be no different," Husband said. "It would be a real blessing for them to pay a tribute to the crew, especially because we're here in Houston. But that doesn't mean that the game shouldn't be fun or it shouldn't be festive. Absolutely, it should be."

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— Evelyn Husband
widow of shuttle commander
Rick Husband

played an address by President George W. Bush on their stadium screens. NFL spokesman Greg Aiello said commissioner Paul Tagliabue and Texans owner Bob McNair have discussed the issue and it is "prominently on our radar screen."

"It was noted the game would fall on the anniversary

NEWS IN BRIEF

Man convicted of sexually assaulting young Irving girl

DALLAS (AP) — A jury on Wednesday convicted an Irving man of sexually assaulting a 3-year-old girl whose body was found in the Trinity River a few days after she disappeared.

Brett Bednarek, 27, faces life in prison. The sentencing phase of the trial started after the verdict was read Wednesday.

Bednarek also has been charged with capital murder in Cristy Ryno's death. Prosecutors have

said they will not seek the death penalty if they find Bednarek later on the murder count.

The victim's twin sister was also in the Irving apartment when Cristy was abducted in April 1999 but was not injured.

In closing arguments Wednesday morning, prosecutors stressed that DNA recovered from Cristy's body was linked conclusively to Bednarek. They also suggested that friends and relatives who accounted for his time the night of the crime were unreliable. The Dallas Morning News reported in its online edition Wednesday.

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