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MICK MCCABE CHRONICLES THE AMAZING TALE OF A 'GROUNDHOG DAY' EXPERIENCE

Inning after inning, the game went on

Karyn McCarty and Kayce Nieto will be forever linked to each other ... and, in a sense, to Bill Murray.

Like Murray, Nieto and McCarty had their "Groundhog Day" experience last week when they pitched against each other in the Catholic League A-B softball championship.

The game between McCarty's Allen Park Cabrini team and Nieto's Farmington Hills Mercy team began Monday and ended Wednesday in the 21st inning.

The teams played 13 innings Monday and then another eight Wednesday before Cabrini pulled out a 2-1 victory.

Both pitchers went the distance. And as they walked to the circle time after time, Nieto and McCarty seemed like characters in their own "Groundhog Day" movie.

"After the 10th inning on Monday I was like, 'Oh, my God, we're still going,'" Nieto said. "The same thing kept happening every inning. And then Wednesday when we went into the eighth inning I thought: 'Oh, my God, it's still going.'"

And going ... and going ... and going.

"There wasn't an end in sight," said McCarty, who has signed with Detroit Mercy. "We were wondering if they were going to call it because there was no give on either side."

Cabrini took a 1-0 lead when Kayla Kostich homered in the second inning. Farmington Hills Mercy tied the game in the fifth, and that seemed to be it for the offense because the pitchers were amazing.

McCarty struck out 29 batters and allowed six hits; Nieto set a state record for an extra-inning game with a phenomenal 41 strikeouts.

"When I found out she was only a sophomore," McCarty said, "I was like, she's going to be a force to be reckoned with."

Nieto already is, even if she doesn't quite realize it yet.

"I honestly didn't feel I was throwing that good during the game," Nieto said. "I was getting behind in counts and stuff. But sometimes I have a weird perception of what I'm doing."

As the game hit the 20th inning, Catholic League officials began to consider declaring the game a tie and the teams co-champs.

Mercy athletic director Nancy Malinow-

finish it in 20 years, kind of like the 1999 Trenton and Detroit Catholic Central hockey teams did recently in "Replay Fueled by Gatorade." (That is an excellent idea, but I'm not sure how Cabrini coach Deb Norman would look coaching third base with a walker.)

Finally, with two out in the 21st, Kostich singled and McCarty drilled the first pitch to left-center to score Kostich. It was only the fifth hit Nieto surrendered in the 21 innings.

"She hit my pitch," Nieto said, "so credit to her."

Hey, credit to everybody, but especially the two sensational pitchers who showed so much poise and composure as they kept going out to the circle inning after inning like the Energizer Bunny.

The state tournament begins this week, and Nieto and McCarty will focus on what lies ahead, rather than on what they each accomplished.

Since that game, each has been told many times over what a terrific game they were a part of, even if it hasn't sunk in yet.

"One of the fans at the game came up to me afterwards," McCarty said. "He said: 'You don't realize it now how special it was what you just did, but five years down the line, 10 years down the line, you're going to look back and realize. Your kids are going to hear about this game and they're going to ask you about this game and you're going to remember everything.'"

Nieto remembers everything now. "It's kind of hard to think about," she said, "but at the same time it's really nice to think about."

When McCarty and Nieto think back on the game, they will remember how well both of them pitched and how they will be linked together forever.

"That's going to be something to remember and she was a part of that," McCarty said. "We should have made a secret handshake or something."