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Woolley Park
GOLF CLUB

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PITCHM

A family affair at Woolley Park

Phil Rowbottom combines running a busy farm with managing a proprietary golf club at Woolley Park near Wakefield. Steve Castle spoke to him to discover how closely the two work together

Profile

Name: Phil Rowbottom.....
Position: Course Manager/
 Farmer.....
Born: Wakefield, 13 February
 1960
Handicap: 12
Hobbies: Clay pigeon shooting
 (Has won a gold medal for
 Great Britain in the World
 Championships)

I arrived at Woolley Park on a grey April day, but with the course, clubhouse and farm buzzing with activity. After some thought, Phil gave his job title as “Course Manager and Farmer” but it’s immediately clear that everyone gets involved in both sides of the business.

Phil explained: “No-one here is just a greenkeeper or just a farmer. There’s a couple of the greenkeepers out of the five staff we have who don’t do a lot of farming but they’ll

muck in when needed. One of them rolls all the corn when we sow it in the autumn. My colleagues Andy Scaman and Richard Thompson came through the farming industry with me. Richard is a farmer’s son who wanted to work on a larger farm, so he came here twenty-odd years ago. He’s vertidrainning today. Myself, my son John and Andy are the key farm staff and the others – Stuart Mason and Peter Colley - help out.

“Farm hands are a very adaptable group. They’re happy to drive a

small mower or a large tractor and they can generally mend things, and Andy and Richard achieved their NVQ2 Greenkeeping at Myerscough.”

The farm’s main function now is drying and storing grain for merchants and local farmers.

This started 25 years ago when father and son built a new grain store.

It turned out to be too big for their requirements, so they stored some oil seed rape as a favour for a neighbour and it grew from there.

Two years ago they constructed another grain plant and 9000 tons of grain went through the drier there last year.

Phil’s grandfather was a tenant at Mount Farm on the site, which lies close to the M1 in Wakefield. His late father David bought the farm in the mid seventies, and after years as a successful crop farm, David then made a decision which initially seemed surprising.

“Around 1992 my dad decided to build a parkland golf course. He didn’t play golf but the sport really was booming at that time.

“We had 150 acres of farmland which we earmarked for building the course. You have to bear in mind that none of the family knew the first thing about golf course construction. I’d studied Agriculture at college but had no real interest in golf.

“We had a friend who was an architect, so we talked to him about planning. Before we knew it we’d bought £12,000 of grass seed to sow it all down and we got stuck in. When you looked at the landscape, it was actually perfect.

“We didn’t need to excavate or move any trees, we just got on with planting grass seed. We tried not to overcomplicate things and that’s the attitude we try and retain today where possible.

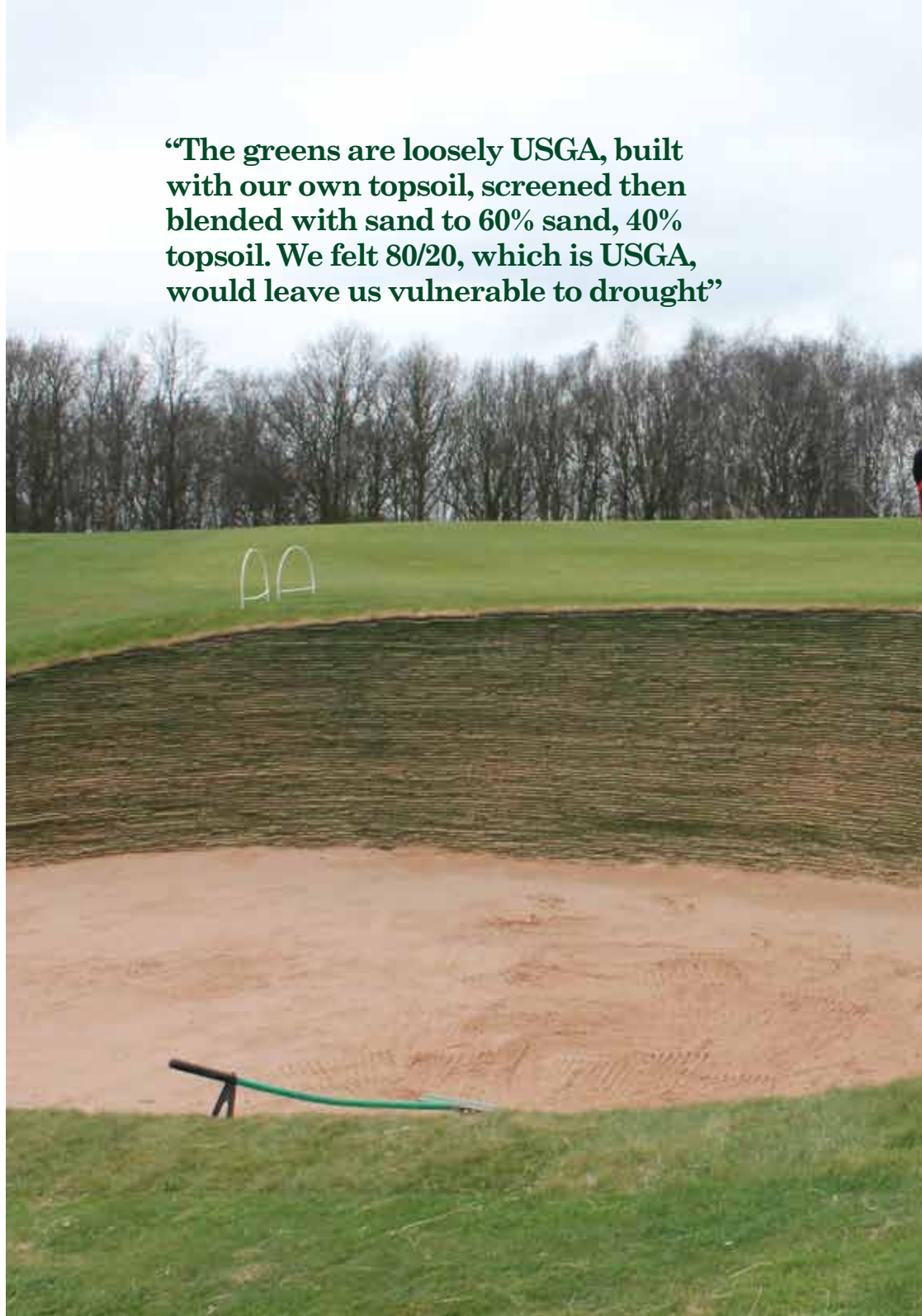
“We bought three shipping containers to act as an office, a shop and the maintenance facility. In reality one had some paperwork in it, one a coffee machine and one a mower.

“My mother took the course fees, my father mowed the fairways and my wife Jane – a schoolteacher by trade - was the first greenkeeper because I was busy running a fertiliser business at that time.

“I bought Jane a second-hand Toro mower at auction and she used that. We ran it as a family top to bottom, and that continues to this day.”

It wasn’t until four years after the course opened that they removed the shipping containers and

“The greens are loosely USGA, built with our own topsoil, screened then blended with sand to 60% sand, 40% topsoil. We felt 80/20, which is USGA, would leave us vulnerable to drought”



constructed the clubhouse which houses a bar, dining area and pro shop.

The family connection is continuing with Phil’s son John working on both the farm and the course. Phil said it’s been a pretty straightforward few years although he recalled one mistake which they had to deal with promptly.

“We did have an incident a good few years ago where some weed killer was accidentally sprayed on the greens, and we had to move play to winter greens in August. We reacted straight away by getting hold of three loads of topdressing, deep scarifying through the turf,

reseeding it in a week and they were back in play in three weeks. It was a genuine error and it’s all about how you react to things – life is never plain sailing as everybody knows.”

The undulating parkland course is now nicely complemented by a nine-hole par three course, which is close to the grain store and farmhouse.

Phil explained that Wakefield has a huge catchment area, and they decided to respond to the need for people to have a quick round of golf after work.

Phil said: “Apart from laying the irrigation, which we contracted out, we built the whole thing. We hired



INNOVATION CORNER!

To save hours of labour, Phil took two seven-foot Sisis slitters and welded them together to create a 14-foot slitter!

He added that the slitters were very useful and highly reliable, but this unusual solution obviously allowed his team to slit larger areas of the course at a time.

Have you come up with a similarly ingenious invention on your course?

If so contact steve.castle@bigga.co.uk and we'll print the best!



a screen, screened our own topsoil, bought sand in and made it into rootzone on site.

"It opened in September 2008 and is proving very popular.

"You can turn up in your jeans and trainers or work gear and have a quick round for £9. It was important we maintained standards so we built it to exactly the same specifications as the main course – properly built greens and good drainage.

"We get dads and lads playing, then they want to play the 18 hole course, and some become members. We opened it right in the middle of the recession but it's been

a real success and kept a steady stream of new golfers coming through the doors."

So what about the future? Phil smiled and said: "My attitude is to tell the lads the golf course looks fantastic today, but I want it better tomorrow.

"If they say they need a new piece of kit I will do my utmost to source the budget for it.

"Any budget left over is spent on the golf course, not the locker room. The customers come through the door to play golf and you have to get repeat customers – so the golf course is the most important thing, and always will be."

MACHINERY LIST

Greens

2 x Toro Greensmaster 3250-D
2 x Toro Reelmaster 3100-D
Dakota Topdresser

Fairways

Toro Reelmaster 6700-D
Ransomes 57 mounted hydraulic with floating heads
Trimax Pegasus 6m semi rough mower
Sisis slitter (two 7 footers welded together!)
Vredo 2.5m seeder

Tee surrounds, paths

Imants Shockwave

Others

Bernhard Anglemaster 3000
Bernhard Express Duel 3000

Bernhard delegates ...where are they now?

If you're still undecided about applying to join the next BIGGA Delegation to America, read on to find out how much influence the trip had on delegates from the last few years



Jaime Acton, 2012 Delegate.
THEN: Head Greenkeeper,
Worlebury Golf Club
NOW: Golf Course Manager,
Rushmore Golf Club



I had no idea just how much the trip would impact on me both professionally and personally.

I feel it has given me the confidence to hold my own professionally, to push myself more in new situations and to move my career to the next level. A few months ago I was offered a new job and took on the challenge of running a lovely proprietary club set in ancient parkland on a private estate. The Show, seminars and site visits we all attended in the States gave me a real thirst to improve myself.



In August Greenkeeper International will again be asking for members to apply to become a member of the Bernhard's Delegation heading to the States and the Golf Industry Show in January.

It's a fabulous shared experience, an opportunity to build new friendships and make new business contacts, but most importantly a priceless tool for learning, educating, training and growing. But don't just take our word for it. GI spoke to some of the delegates from the last decade to find out how much the trip influenced them professionally and personally...



Richard Jenkinson, 2013 Delegate.
THEN: Deputy Course Manager G West
NOW: Same position

It truly was the most unforgettable experience I've had in my career. One real highlight were the tours around Torrey Pines and La Costa. It was fascinating to see the differences between them even though they are only ten minutes apart.

The management style is similar but the terrain and composition of the courses are completely different. I now understand why previous delegates described it as a very tough but life-changing week.



Rob Sandilands, 2011 Delegate.
THEN: Deputy Head Greenkeeper, Elsham Golf Club
NOW: Head Greenkeeper, Grange-over-Sands Golf Club

I was the only deputy on the trip, and the group of Course Managers and Head Greenkeepers during the week in Orlando had a big influence on me at the time, and they've continued to have a major influence on me since. They gave me some great advice, including some really important tips you don't always get in the textbooks!

I really feel the experience gave me that boost to get my first Head Greenkeeper job, which I secured just two months later.



Matt Plested, 2006 Delegate.
THEN: Deputy, Old Ford Manor Golf Club
NOW: Course Manager, Muswell Hill Golf Club

A year after my trip, I secured my first Course Managers position at Muswell Hill and the Bernhard Delegation certainly helped – I was told it made my CV stand out. It's a fantastic, amazing experience. It opened my eyes to how professional they were in the States, and I returned determined to incorporate some of their ideas into my club. I learnt so much.

It's also fantastic from a personal point of view. My roommate was Greg Skinner, who's now at Forest Hill Golf & Country Club, and we had a real laugh and became good mates.

Not only that, we still speak to each other about issues on our courses and help solve problems – all this as a result of that one week.



Les Howkins MG, 2004 Delegate.
THEN: Head Greenkeeper, Cleethorpes Golf Club
NOW: Course Manager, The Richmond Golf Club

I remember thinking on my trip that the US were much more advanced in certain areas, although I do feel we've caught up now. I recall we went to a seminar discussing absolutely everything about Primo, which at that time was unavailable in the UK. This meant that when Primo did become available over here, I had a head start over other greenkeepers and wasn't afraid to use it because I was very well informed about it. The Golf Industry Show was also an amazing experience, the scale of it was colossal.

Another thing that sticks in my mind is one of the course visits to a course called The Bridges. They had 55 staff and 14 gardeners looking after an 18-hole course, and they couldn't believe how few staff we had in comparison! You're looked after so well while you're out there and I can't imagine why a greenkeeper would not want to apply to join the delegation.

“A year after my trip, I secured my first Course Managers position at Muswell Hill and the Bernhard Delegation certainly helped – I was told it made my CV stand out. It's a fantastic, amazing experience”
Matt Plested, 2006 Delegate



Ian Kinley, 2006 Delegate
THEN: Course Manager, The Glen Golf Club
NOW: Course Manager, Royal Porthcawl Golf Club

I went to Atlanta (right) and the key for me was the feeling that you're getting involved not just in the American perspective on course maintenance, but the world. Lifetime friendships were made on that trip, you spend a lot of time with the other delegates and get to know them really well and exchange opinions and ideas.



Gordon McKie, 2003 Delegate.
THEN: Head Greenkeeper, The Eden Course, St Andrews
NOW: Course Manager, The Old Course, St Andrews

The ten years since I went has flown by but I still remember so many elements of the trip. A real highlight for me was the educational side, I recall attending a GCSAA Seminar on Communications which I found particularly useful, and I referred back to it repeatedly as my career progressed.

I also learnt a lot from the guys I travelled with. We were all able to offer advice to each other, and we really built up a great camaraderie between us. Several of us still stay in touch now, either meeting at BTME or on Facebook or Twitter. I've no doubt that the whole experience really enhanced my career.





The 2012 BIGGA Delegation

Sallie Taylor talked to the 2012 Delegates to find out how the trip impacted them at the time, and what lessons they have carried with them a year down the line

The US visit is hugely important not just as a fabulous shared experience, an opportunity to build new friendships and make new business contacts, but most importantly as a tool for learning, educating, training and growing, as last years delegates are keen to testify.

Stuart Yarwood, Course Manager at Lymm Golf Club said:

"For me the trip dispelled lots of myths. I realised that in the US education comes from the top down alongside their practical knowledge.

"I have been trying to apply this back home - to think like the person I want to be perceived as. In the UK we tend to start at the bottom and work up, learning on the way, so that for many people, when they find themselves in a managerial position they don't have any of the basic skills to do that job. If you put lads in a horrible tin shed with the wind howling through it they will apply those standards on the golf course."

Neil Ballingall, Course Manager at Fairmont St Andrews, said:

"I found some of the seminars at GIS really useful.

"We had a long session on growth-retardant which was great, very in depth.

"I knew it stopped the grass growing, but I didn't know how or why. We learned that if you don't reapply at the correct time it can have the opposite effect.

"Such a small thing that had such a big effect, and I've had a really successful year because I am using it properly."

David Gray, First Assistant Greenkeeper at Ladybank Golf Club, agrees:

"The trip gave me a greater drive for education. I loved the seminars and bouncing off the other guys.

"The trip will always benefit me. I was one of the youngest and most of the others were Head Greenkeepers, three were Master Greenkeepers and they taught me so much - getting their views on things and learning from their vast amount of knowledge was amazing.

"I actually learned new things and new ways to work. It was invaluable.

"To give you an example, just last month I had an engineering problem with something. I just couldn't find an answer.

"In the end I called Stuart Hall, who was also on the trip, and he solved the problem in a few minutes.

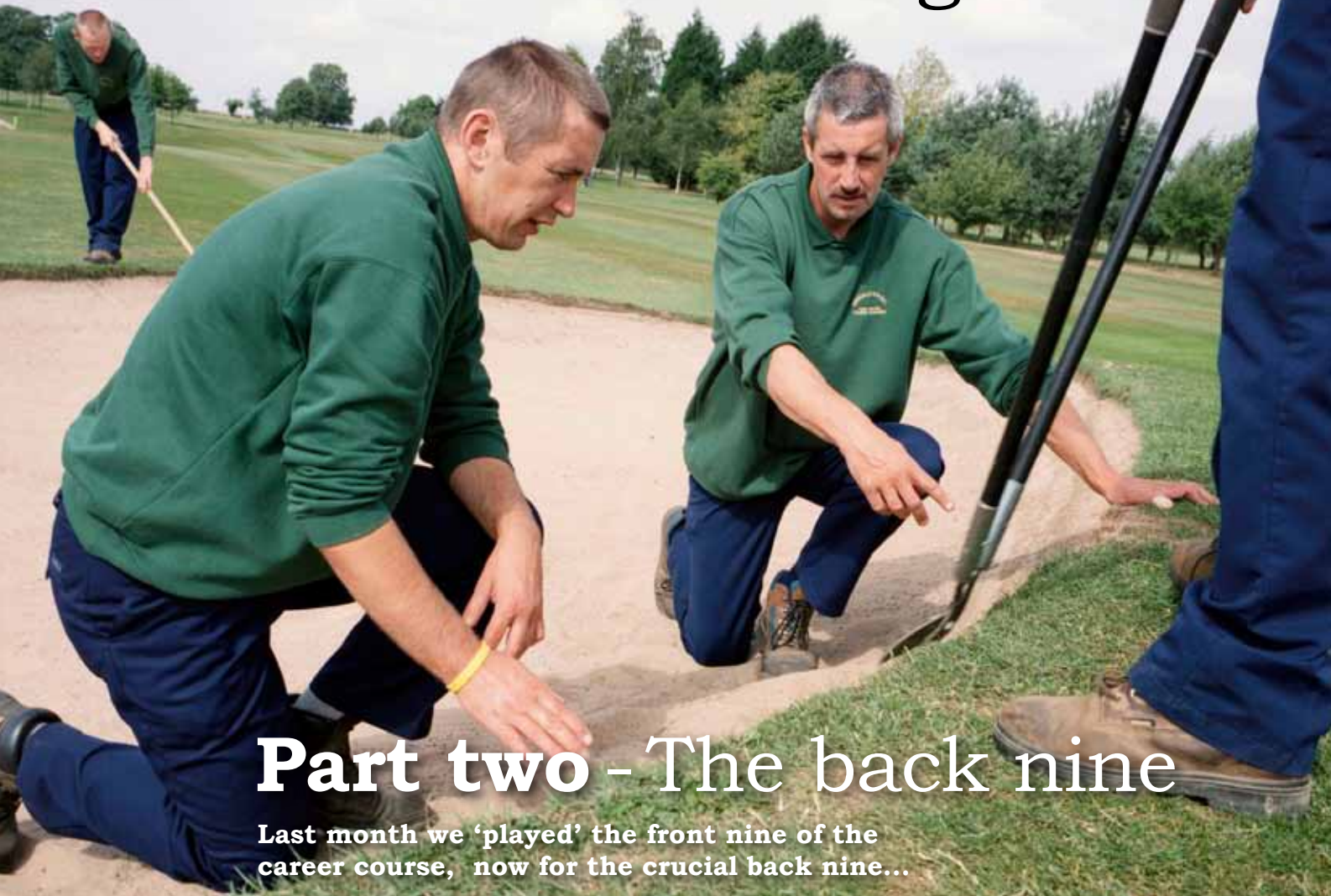
"The trip gave me a greater drive for education. I loved the seminars and bouncing off the other guys. The trip will always benefit me"

"Then you realise the importance of friends and shared experiences.

"The moment I was selected I knew I was always going to make the most of it, but it has changed my career big time and I will always refer back to it.

"The trip spurred my education and encouraged me to pass on knowledge to fellow colleagues and discuss things with my boss."

18 steps to becoming a Golf Course Manager



Part two - The back nine

Last month we 'played' the front nine of the career course, now for the crucial back nine...

10. Budgeting

For many this is often the most boring hole on the course and thus the one that receives the least concentration – a real card wrecker. Budgeting is a great discipline for any manager.

If you carefully plan and build your budgets you can make them work in your favour, making your aims easier to achieve. If you can draw up a management policy for your golf course and quantify the resources needed to execute this policy, you have all the information you need to draw up a budget.

Obviously you will need to look at all the small detail to ensure you get your annual expenditure fully quoted and priced, but this is, comparatively, the easy bit.

As with the policy document, look at as much golf course budget information as you can from your

boss or the club's financial controller. Once you see a comprehensively detailed spreadsheet showing the main budget headline costs and their respective sub-division line items all will become much clearer. Of course these will just be figures, you still have to be able to demonstrate control and the ability to find savings when asked.

11. Negotiation

You will need to develop good negotiation skills, not just for purchasing purposes, but also for management situations, dealing with bosses/committees and of course getting the salary package that you feel you justify.

You will need to toughen up. Business is business, all the rest is social interaction that makes the world go around.

A better term for negotiation is being persuasive, as with influencing when communicating you should be persuasive in negotiation.

You negotiate all the time in life. We all develop our own set of persuasive skills to win what we want, however the best negotiations end in 'win-win' situations.

As with all management preparation is the key, ensure you have a list of fact-based points backed up by sound persuasive arguments.

There is no substitute for experience in negotiation situations.

When a person with money and little experience meets a person with little money but lots of experience, the first person ends up with experience and the second person ends up with money.

The 'second' people are usually your bosses and sales representatives.