Bill Taurere before . . .

. . . and after

Vanishing point: weighting game over for strear

By DONNA CHISHOLM

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That was until his mate Dave Kaire stepped in – encouraging the boss of the firm where Taurere had worked for more than 20 years to pay the first two months of gym fees and a personal trainer.

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Taurere should be rightfully proud of his achievement, said Masters. "Now he

can start to feel good about himself again."

And the first sign of the new man? Last week, Taurere tucked his shirt in for the first time in years.

MEASURE OF A MAN

see Focus C1,3

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Six months after losing a staggering 64kg with a new diet and exer
transformation in a Wellington hospital theatre this month. **D**

rcise regime, Auckland labourer Bill Taurere completed his amazing
DONNA CHISHOLM *was there to record the life-changing event.*

Measure of a man

BILL TAURERE'S belly sits in a white plastic bag on a set of kitchen scales. The rest of Taurere lies 2 metres away in the operating theatre as John Masters completes eight hours of surgery colloquially known as a tummy tuck.

It is a grotesquely understated description of this operation, implying as it does a neat little gusset in the gut. In effect, the surgery at one point turns Taurere's torso almost inside out.

It pares from him 18 years of bad living and rewards nearly 18 months of effort to reclaim the body nature intended him to have. For the belly, there is no going back. For Taurere, life as a slim man is just beginning.

On the scales in the operating theatre of the Southern Cross Hospital in Wellington, the belly weighs in at 3.47kg. At its peak last year, it would have been 10 times that. But this isn't just another story about weight loss. On the scales of human achievement, this is about measuring mateship and motivation, teamwork and tenacity.

Ultimately, it is a story of a life saved. At 162kg and growing, the Auckland labourer was heading inexorably to an early death – a certainty the then 42-year-old hadn't even begun to consider, much less tackle. The only times his obesity bothered him was when he had to force his expanding girth under the steering wheel of his ute. "I was comfortable the way I was," he says.

Which makes his belly's journey – particularly its final step into the operating room – all the more remarkable.

Of those who join a gym with great intentions, only 40% will still be going a year later. Of those with life-threatening obesity, only 10% maintain their weight loss for two years. The body, having once reached such levels, seems to want naturally to return there. Even fewer achieve what Taurere has – his fitness levels now put him in the top 5% of his age group.

When Taurere's redemption began in June 2003, he had no great desire to change. His unlikely saviour was his 60-something mate, Dave Kaire. Kaire owned the concrete-cutting company which used Taurere as a sub-contractor and he had watched Taurere's weight slowly balloon since he'd met him 20-odd years before.

Kaire convinced Taurere to join him at Les Mills World of Fitness under trainer Steve Callinan – and then persuaded the boss of the company where Taurere had worked for more than 20 years to pay the first two months' fees.

Kaire and Callinan perceived in the shy Taurere something Taurere probably didn't see in himself. Kaire saw a potential kaumatua; a solo father of three who had the respect of the men who worked for him. A man who'd already kicked the drink and the smokes but who now needed to kick the weight.

British-born soccer pro Callinan saw the physical specimen Taurere should have been. And still could be – a blank canvas on which willpower and effort could create, if not Charles Atlas, then at least a hunk with a decent six-pack and biceps who could start dating again after more than a decade on his own.

When they first met, Callinan was shocked. "His body wasn't functioning. This was a guy who had completely let himself go. His clothes were so baggy they were almost like robes. He had sawdust in his hair, he was unshaven, he was a mess, to be fair. He was very quiet, very subdued – almost like he had been pushed in there. But there was a small little thing in his eye which said he wouldn't be there if he didn't want to be."

Taurere could have taken or left Callinan's gruelling regime in those early days. Could have done without the 4.30am wake-ups to join Kaire or Callinan, walking for an hour around city streets or up Franklin Rd's gut-busting incline.

So why did he persevere? "When I start something, I like to finish it."

The first day, Taurere stopped five times in 100m walking up a small incline. Callinan: "At the top I said, 'You remember this day for the rest of your life so you never go back."

As each kilogram was lost – about 10 a month for those first three months, nearly five each month after – an ounce of motivation was gained. For each 10kg lost, Callinan gave him the equivalent in steel weights and told him to feel it.

Taurere's dedication earned the respect of those around him in the gym – including boxer

To Focus C3

Hair by Silarmon at The Cut Above on Cameron; Dressed by Hugo Boss from Cuba, Chancery.

Fat boy slimmed: Bill Taurere before and after tummy tuck surgery following the loss of 64kg. Photo: Brendon O'Hagan

From Focus C1

David Tua, who came over one morning to say, "Well done, bro; keep it up."

THE *SUNDAY STAR-TIMES* met Taurere in Les Mills' gym in February, when we featured his 50kg weight loss in a series on health.

By October, when he had lost 60kg, we met again in Wellington where he had his pre-op consultation with plastic surgeon John Masters.

Callinan realised very early on that Taurere would need more than diet change and exercise to achieve his new body. After stretching to contain a 160kg man, the skin does not recover easily.

Together with Kaire, he knocked on the corporate doors to raise money for the operation. First to sign up was Les Mills World of Fitness. Then Southern Cross Hospital agreed to let Taurere stay for nothing for five nights in a $450-a-night bed.

The tummy tuck, known medically as a circumferential abdominoplasty, is not a get-thin-quick scheme. For rapid weight loss, says Masters, go to a gastric stapler.

A self-described "bogan westie", Masters, 38, is building his new rooms himself and paying off the six-figure debt he racked up while studying specialised hand and plastic reconstructive surgery in the United States.

Unlike most specialists who split their time between public and private sector, Masters is 100% private. Commercially savvy, he has called his practice Plastic Surgical Masters and his website (nzcosmeticsurgery.co.nz) catches would-be patients trawling the net for information.

He has the pallor of someone who spends too much time under operating room lights and too little time in the sun, but the gleam in the eye of someone who loves what he does. "He has a fetish about fat – removing it," his wife and practice manager Leanne explains.

Masters has never operated on a man who has lost as much weight as Taurere and he is excited about the chance to change his life.

"My kids are calling it a caesarean," Taurere tells him.

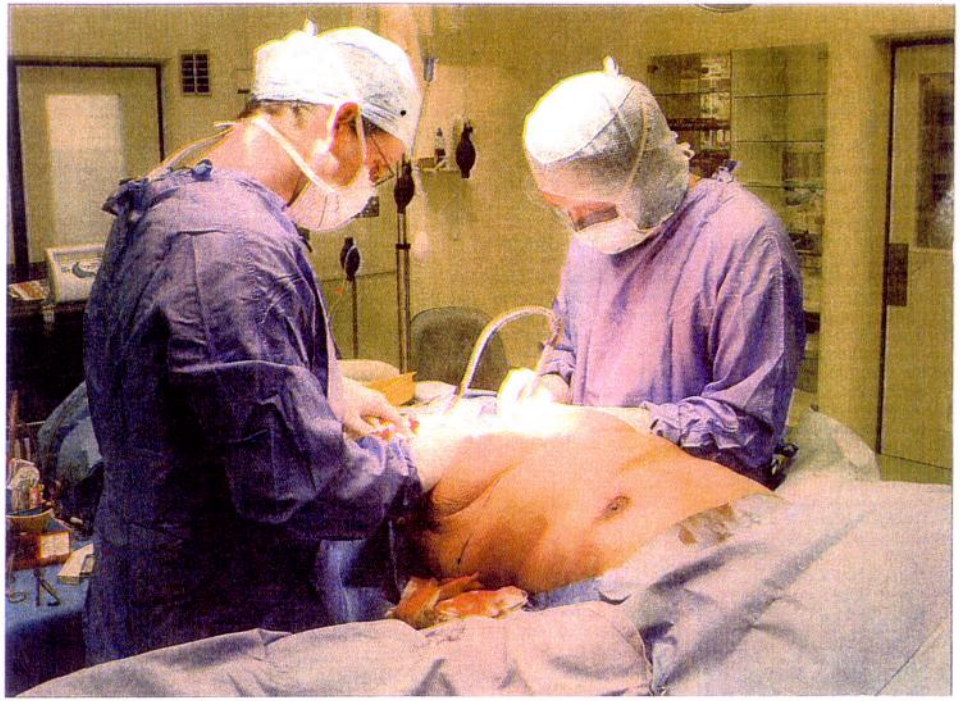
"It's going to be a big one," says Masters. "You're going to be rehatched."

Cosmetic surgery is not about vanity, he says. Masters almost hisses with rage when the v-word comes up.

"I do have the occasional vain patient but the vast majority are everyday people with regular concerns that are completely valid. They are in it for the way they feel in their clothes and the way they conduct their life. The best thing is no one knows and that's great cosmetic surgery."

Taurere has an Austrian blind of skin and fat sagging over his belt that no amount of diet or exercise is going to shift. Sometimes, when he looks down at his gut, he still feels fat.

"Bill should be rightfully proud of what he's achieved," says Masters. "Now having done all the hard yards, he doesn't have the body he thought he would have or that he deserves."



Cut and shut: Bill Taurere during his 8½ hour operation, attended by surgeon John Masters, right, and scrub nurse Steve Burton. Below: John Masters. Photo: Kevin Stent

Masters says he sees too few Maori patients. He asks Taurere if he would like his body tissue returned to him after the surgery for cultural reasons.

"No mate," says Taurere. "I'm trying to get rid of it."

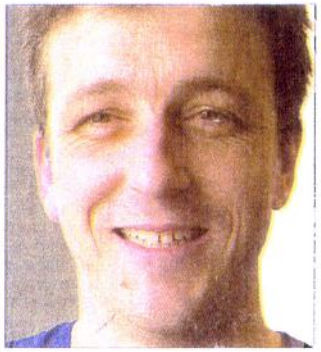
THE NIGHT before surgery, Taurere is remarkably relaxed. Kaire has flown to Wellington with him – it's the first time Taurere has been to the capital. In the past he didn't fly that often because he had trouble doing up the buckle in the airline seats.

"In my wildest imaginings I wouldn't have thought we'd have got to this point," says Kaire.

"He's been a revelation. What he has done is not easy but he has done it the right way. I'm pissed off he's dropped weight faster than me but I'm proud of him. What we are doing now is a bonus."

He'd tried to get other workers to join the gym and they'd told him to f--- off, he says. With Taurere, you never had to force it. "But I'm not big-headed enough to think that as a result of this half the overweight Maoris are going to be crowding Franklin Rd so Bill and I can't run up it at 4.30 in the morning," says Kaire.

When they started working out together, says Kaire – who lost 30kg under Callinan – he was leaving Taurere behind on the road walks. "Now I can't keep up with him."



'Bill, what are you doing to me mate?' mutters Masters as he zaps yet another bloody geyser with the diathermy machine.

IN THE operating room, Masters, anaesthetist Don Mackie and the theatre nurses have taken a chocolate fish sweepstake to estimate the amount of tissue Taurere will lose during the operation. Masters' record is 10kg. Mackie estimates 4.1kg, Masters 4.05kg and scrub nurse Steve Burton 3.85kg.

A total of 2.53kg has been removed from Taurere's back by the time Masters tackles his gut three hours later.

Although Masters has injected adrenalin-containing fluid into the tissue to help shut down the blood vessels and reduce bleeding, as surgery starts, it's clear Taurere is going to bleed – a lot.

"Bill, what are you doing to me, mate?" mutters Masters as he zaps yet another bloody geyser with the diathermy machine. It's part of what happens when you've been obese – the blood vessels enlarge. An ECG tracing shows Taurere's heart is also enlarged, but he has no symptoms and with a pulse rate of under 50, he's very fit.

Today, Masters will create a hole in Taurere's tummy skin for his belly button to emerge through. The old site is in the 35cm horizontal zone to be removed.

Masters will have just one 10-minute break between his 8.30am start and 4.45pm finish – with theatre time costing $18 a minute, that coffee is the most expensive a patient will ever buy, he says.

As Masters slices down to Taurere's abdominal muscles, he laments the "incredibly primitive art form" that is surgery. "Its days are numbered. In future there will be a lot more disease avoidance than pathetic attempts at repair. Even the most delicate micro-surgery is pure plumbing. All I am doing is putting the tissues somewhere near where we need them. It is up to Bill's body to do the rest."

The diathermy machine cuts and burns the fat and tissue, beeping like an ambulance siren, and causing static on the radio belting out rock in the background. The bogan prefers Meatloaf to Mozart.

It takes 40 minutes to separate an apron-sized flap of Taurere's gut from the muscle below. Ultimately, Burton hooks his index finger through the hole where Taurere's belly button was and pulls up the slab of skin and tissue to allow Masters better access beneath.

Years of obesity have splayed the muscles in Taurere's abdomen so in the midline they are now about 6cm apart. After dotting a line along the muscle in marker pen, Masters stitches them together – it will cause post-op discomfort but give Taurere a better chance of being able to hone that six-pack.

The body does not replace the fat cells that are removed – the existing cells simply grow or shrink – and the tummy tuck means Taurere won't be able to put on as much weight as before.

Seven hours after surgery begins, Masters is on to the last lap – sewing Taurere back together again. The body is like an onion, with multiple layers. The interior stitches – hundreds of them – are inserted in the strengthening layer, known as the fascia. Too much pressure on the stitches in the skin itself would cause a wide and ugly scar.

Nurse Jos Pigou plops the bag full of Taurere's tummy on to the scales and tots up its 3.47kg together with the 2.53kg removed from the back. Ah, 6.00kg. A nice round figure. "A nice round figure?" Burton retorts. 'I thought that's just what he didn't want."

IT IS 7.30am on Day One post-surgery. Bill Taurere eases gingerly on to one side in his hospital room; his mechanised pressure stockings his as they force the blood north from his legs and reduce the chances of clotting.

In a few days he'll return home, still wearing the drains taking fluid from the wound, and for the next couple of weeks, he will wear a pressure suit to promote his healing.

Taurere is already showing signs of a mental as well as physical transformation. "I wasn't very excited before – I'm more excited now.

"I never thought about how it was going to be – I didn't think I would be so happy about it, being the sort of guy I am. I can't remember the last time I had a stomach like this – even at school I don't think I looked this flat.

"I am really, really glad it's gone. And I'm never going back there."