

# BROWN BUTTABEAN

## From the ring to the street

**Dave Letele is an unlikely-looking saint, but he is one all the same.**

Standing over 6 feet 3 inches tall, and with a big build, he's covered in tattoos and keeps his hair short. He can punch, too — with a 76-inch reach. We know that because he used to be a pro boxer, with an impressive win record of 16 from 20.

Even more impressively, the 'Brown Buttabean', as he's known, became a model for others as he showcased his own personal weight-loss battle. Once he'd hung up his gloves, Dave piled on the weight ('I loved the takeaways too much,' he confesses). The light switch went on for Dave when he realised that he couldn't tie his shoelaces, and that he started sweating when walking just a few metres. So he set his mind to it and managed to turn it around, shedding over 100 kilos through a combination of exercise and a better diet.

A leader in the South Auckland community he lives in, Dave has since then dedicated his life to helping others get healthy and fit, and to fighting the obesity epidemic in his area. The community's largely Māori and Pasifika populations are predisposed to unhealthy weight gain, and the predominance of cheap, fatty fast-food in the area is a recipe for a lot of weight-

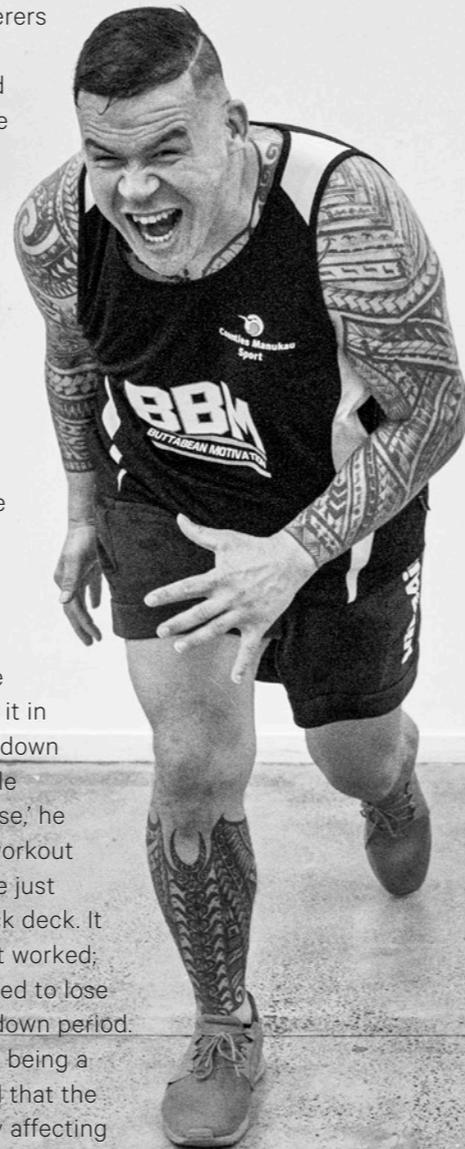
related illness. ('Too many fried-chicken joints, and everyone is walking around drinking fizzy drinks instead of water.')

Dave set up a gym, BBM (for 'Brown Buttabean Motivation'), with free classes and education sessions for the community, helping dozens of people shed hundreds of kilos of life-threatening fat. He tells stories of helping diabetes sufferers who weighed over 200 kilos to shed weight, and how he helps change the food habits of those he helps.

Although Dave and his team get some funding through local community trusts, it's largely volunteer work. It's hard, but Dave and his team make a huge difference to the lives of the people in their community.

During the first Covid lockdown, Dave ran his exercise sessions online where he could, because of course he couldn't do it in person. 'Just before lockdown we went virtual, so people could continue to exercise,' he says. 'We did 17 virtual workout sessions a week, with me just running them on my back deck. It was f\*kn hard, bro.' But it worked; one of his clients managed to lose 20 kilos during the lockdown period.

They also pivoted into being a food bank. Dave realised that the poverty that was already affecting



so many was going to be a real and growing issue during lockdown. As the prime minister declared the move to Level 3, Dave and his team ran around getting some food parcels sorted for some of their most at-risk people, dropping them off the night before the curfew. 'It's amazing how excited some people can get when you just give them some eggs,' he muses, which goes to show the depth of need in some of the communities he serves.

Dave increased the support where he could, taking donations of food and supplies from the community and distributing them to those that need them. ('At one point we had blankets everywhere, ready to give out.')

He arranged free flu jabs for the community, causing another traffic jam, and got the food bank properly set up. But sourcing the food and supplies isn't always easy. 'It gets to the point where I just pay for it myself, because the food bank doesn't have enough money to support everyone.'

They asked to be registered as an essential business, and worked with some of the large food suppliers to have any excess stock delivered to his gym. Auckland Council also dropped off a load of supplies to them, which allowed them to really get the food bank established. Sir Michael Jones organised a bunch of vegetables for them, and they signed up with an organisation that ensures excess food gets distributed. 'It's good that we can get the food now, but we still have to pay for the fridges, the delivery vehicles, the staff — it's not easy.'

When Level 4 lockdown was

downgraded to Level 3 (which, for obvious reasons, fast became known as 'lockdown-lite: lockdown with takeaways'), Dave was dismayed to see the cars queueing up at the local KFC, McDonald's and other fast-food joints. He posted on his Facebook page that the BBM gym had food parcels available, along with some other essentials like nappies. The response was incredible: 'We stopped traffic on the two motorways nearby with cars trying to get to us — people were desperate. The police were called, and when they came to clear the traffic and see what was going on there was a tense moment.'

'You are helping control the traffic outside the fast-food joints,' Dave challenged them, 'why not here?' The police backed off and left him to his work.

The day I talked to Dave he was tired. He'd been working all day at the gym, then done a motivational talk for a group (that's how he gets his own income), and still had a long night ahead of him trying to work out how to fulfil what seems like an endless demand for his help. 'It's awesome, but it really takes a toll on me,' he sighs wearily. 'What we're doing needs to be sustainable. I need staff, and funds to pay for them. But we'll get there. I guess I'm just impatient.'

If you'd like to donate to Dave and his charity, google 'Just Move Charitable Health Trust' to help him out.