

# Emiliano Sala: little hope player and pilot are alive, say rescuers

Police to decide on Thursday whether to keep searching, as pilot is named as Dave Ibbotson

Rescuers fear that there is little hope of finding the footballer Emiliano Sala and an experienced pilot alive after their light aircraft went missing over the Channel Islands.

The search for the new Cardiff City striker Sala and the pilot, who has been named as Dave Ibbotson from Lincolnshire, was postponed as darkness fell on Guernsey on Wednesday. A decision on whether to resume the search would be made early on Thursday, police said. It is understood that a French navy vessel had been directed to the area to assist.

Earlier on Wednesday, Guernsey police had raised hopes by saying searchers were focusing on the possibility that the pair had made it into a life raft. But some of those involved in the rescue said that even if this was the case, there was little chance they would have survived since Monday night in cold, choppy conditions.

## The flight from Nantes to Cardiff disappeared from radar near the Casquets lighthouse

Sala, 28, and Ibbotson, 59, have been missing since their plane disappeared from radar over the Channel as the footballer was being flown to Cardiff having been sold to the Welsh club by Nantes for £13M.

The search has focused on a 280 sq mile area north of Guernsey that is close to shipping lanes and dotted with reefs.

Sala, who is Argentinian, is believed to have sent a voicemail message to his father saying he was frightened that the plane was about to break up. He said: "I'm here on a plane that looks like it's about to fall apart, and I'm going to Cardiff ... If in an hour and a half you have no news from me, I don't know if they are going to send someone to look for me because they cannot find me, but you know ... Dad, how scared am I!"

Sala's former girlfriend Berenice Schkair, 27, wrote on social media: "I want to wake up and all of this to be a lie. Please investigate because I cannot believe this accident." In a separate post, which was later deleted, Buenos Aires-born Schkair wrote: "Investigate the football mafia, because I don't believe this was an accident."

Ibbotson is an experienced flyer and a member of the British Parachute Association (BPA), from the small town of Crowle near Scunthorpe.

Debra Middleton, the mayor of Crowle and Ealand, said Ibbotson was "very well known and very well liked" and that residents were hoping desperately for a positive outcome. "We all really do feel for his family. Everybody's listening to the news and hoping everything's OK."



Humberside police said: “We can confirm that north Lincolnshire man David Ibbotson is believed to be the pilot of the light aircraft that went missing near Guernsey. Specially trained officers are supporting Mr Ibbotson’s family, who have asked for privacy at this difficult time.”

Guernsey police had said on Wednesday morning that rescuers were working on four possibilities:

- Sala and Ibbotson landed elsewhere but have not made contact.
- They landed on water and have been picked up by a passing ship but have not made contact.
- They landed on water and made it into a life raft police know was onboard.
- The aircraft broke up on contact with the water, leaving them in the sea.

The police said the search was focusing on the life raft option.

Capt David Barker, the Guernsey harbourmaster, leading the operation, said there was still a chance that the pair could be alive if they had made it into a life raft. “Nobody here, including me, is giving up,” he said.

John Fitzgerald, the Channel Islands Air Search chief officer, said: “We’re out there looking for something you don’t expect to see, whether it’s a whole aircraft, a life raft or bits of whatever. We have seen lots of things in the water, but that’s not to say they’re from the plane. They could be from the ship, from the land, anywhere.”

Fitzgerald suggested it was unlikely the pair would survive for days even if they were in a raft. “The sea is 8-9C. That takes your core temperature away very quickly. Unless you are in a survival suit and really know how to look after yourself, you will have severe issues.” Privately, others directly involved in the rescue said there was very little hope.

The UK Air Accidents Investigation Branch said the plane was unlikely to have been fitted with a flight recorder, or black box. A vital tool for crash investigators, black boxes are mandatory on airliners and business jets, but not on light aircraft such as the Piper PA-46 Malibu that Sala was travelling in.

The plane took off at 7.15pm on Monday and was flying at an altitude of 5,000ft (1,500 metres). On passing Guernsey, it “requested descent”, but Jersey air traffic control lost contact with it while it was at 2,300ft.

Cardiff City said Sala had arranged the flight himself. The club chairman, Mehmet Dalman, told BBC Radio Wales: “We spoke to the player and asked him if he wanted us to make arrangements for his flight, which would have been commercial. He declined and made his own arrangements.” It is believed that a football agent may have helped him arrange the flight.

Guernsey police said: “After an intensive search using multiple aircraft and one lifeboat over the last nine hours, we have found no trace of the missing plane. With the light now fading, the search will be suspended for the night. A decision about whether to recommence will be taken early tomorrow morning.”

In a statement, Sala’s agent, Mark McKay, expressed his sadness at the news. “I knew Emiliano well,” he said. “He was a wonderful person and I count myself fortunate to have known him.” He made it clear that neither he nor anyone in his family owned the aircraft.