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By Lornet Turnbull, Beacon Journal business writer
Winning the duel of dealers/ Large local Ford dealerships both claim to be No. 1 at something, but Columbus dealer really leads Ohio

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It's hard to escape the battle of the Ford dealers.

Their booming advertisements scream out at you from radio, television and newspaper advertising throughout Northeast Ohio, staking their claim at being No. 1 -- in one thing or another. Clarke Ford in Hudson pegs itself Ohio's Ford Giant: Mr. Big Volume, and can safely lay claim to the title of this region's single-site top volume retail dealer. Mullinax Ford, with locations in Amherst, Wickliffe, North Canton and Margate, Fla., calls itself the No. 1 Ford retailer in the U.S.A.

But have you ever wondered how well these dealers' claims really hold up?

Automotive News' recently issued Market Data Book gives some insight, placing Clarke and Mullinax's Amherst franchise almost neck to neck. It reports 6,836 in 1994 retail sales for Mullinax Amherst, ranking it sixth nationwide, and estimates 5,000 in sales for Clarke, placing it seventh.

But Clarke says Automotive News' estimate is way off and that the dealership's 1994 sales of 7,080 make it fifth in the nation and No. 1 in the Pittsburgh region, which includes Northeast Ohio.

"Amherst is Mullinax's biggest store and we sell far more than they do," said Ellen Mastrangelo, general counsel for the dealership. She noted that Clarke won Ford's 1994 sales achievement award for the Pittsburgh region and remains in first place for this year.

Larry Mullinax, general manager of the Mullinax Amherst dealership, said Clarke is "a rival but we don't worry too much about them."

"We're coming off the best year we ever had," Mullinax said, noting that Mullinax locations sold more than 31,000 new and used cars and trucks last year.

Mullinax and Clarke are safe if they keep the competition confined to Northeast Ohio. Once outside this area, the contest isn't even close.

Columbus' Ricart Ford is not only the largest volume Ford dealer in Ohio, it is the top dealership franchise in the nation. It's been that way for years.

It is also the second highest-volume retail franchise among dealers of all models.

Other Mullinax dealers also surfaced near the top.

Mullinax Ford South in Margate, Fla., was ranked seventh among the top 10 dealers -- with 7,075 in sales last year. Mullinax Lincoln-Mercury in Brunswick, with an estimated 2,000 in sales, was ninth among Lincoln-Mercury dealers.

"Of course everyone wants to be No. 1," Mullinax said. "A list like this is a good motivator when you're trying to move up."

And what of Mullinax's claim to being the No. 1 retailer in the U.S.A. when all five dealerships are considered?

Ford officials would neither confirm nor deny it.